



Tacoma, Washington

The Feast of the Annunciation | March 25, 2020

Annunciations in the Midst of Pandemic

Fr. Samuel Torvend

Between working at Pacific Lutheran University and serving at Christ Church, much of my life and time is shaped by a daily and weekly schedule of meetings, student appointments, preparing for class at school and adult formation at church, teaching, responding to emails, grading papers and tests, and working on scholarship for publication. In this regard, my sense of time is strongly shaped by the secular keeping of time: show up when needed or required, meet deadlines, and respond to questions and concerns. There is work and rest, work and rest. I wonder: Does it ring a bell?

The New Testament refers to this sense of daily and weekly time – ordinary time – as *chronos* (as in chronicle, chronology). It is an experience of time shaped by the culture and the work in which we are engaged. I am reminded of a beloved uncle who spent much of life focused on the end of the day, the end of the week, and the beginning of vacations – anything to break the burden of work, work, work, of *chronos*. This is not to say that ordinary work cannot be meaningful and life giving – it can; but rather to ask: *What or who governs or guides your experience of time?*



With many others, I choose to live as best I can by another schedule, another sense of time shaped by the feasts and seasons of the Christian year that, like a sacrament, reveal the Presence of God through the events, movements, and people of our ancient and global Christian community. Rather than expend energy on keeping Patriot's Day, Family Day, Labor Day, Valentine's Day, or Father's Day (dubiously created by an all-male social group envious of the attention given to women on Mother's Day), many of us keep the days that offer open doors to the great mysteries of Christian life.

These are the feasts that reveal what the New Testament calls *kairos*: an opportune moment when the Reign of God's love and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation enters into ordinary time and invites us to welcome its particular grace into our lives. Needless to say, this sense of time asks us to be intentional in keeping it.

Thus, we come to the feast of the Annunciation and do so this year, 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic. I don't know if this Christian holy day intrudes into your life. Perhaps we are so busy with other matters – either work or working from home or just trying to get through each day without anxiety – that it might not register in our consciousness. But in this season of panic and pandemic, let's give it a few minutes of our time. Here's why ...

The feast invites us into the story of an unexpected encounter. The angel Gabriel comes to a village of little significance. The angel's name - *Gavriel* in Hebrew – means “God is my strength.” The unexpected visitor greets a young woman named Mary who, no different from all young women, was enclosed within her household, never permitted to go in public except with a male escort. Luke writes that she was much perplexed and can you blame her? While most people throughout the world today (with the exception of North Americans and Western Europeans living around the world) don't bat an eye at otherworldly visitations, the point here is that the angelic visitor comes to a very ordinary if not poor and lowly young woman – someone with no privileges on which to rely: no education, no work with a living wage, no bank account, no high social status.

Do you notice that her surprise is expressed with perplexity and questioning? She



may have had no education but she was certainly a critical thinker, refusing to take this greeting and its announcement at face value. And at the same time, she is willing to accept the claim that God finds favor with her and that she will give birth to a child whose name – Jesus in English and *Yeshua* in Hebrew – means “God saves” or “God is saving.” And, then Mary, the very young woman, is told that her very old relative, Elizabeth, has conceived and will soon give birth to a child.

It would seem that God's presence crosses social boundaries and upsets conventional wisdom about where God is to be found: not with privileged males or social celebrities or the overly pious or powerful political leaders. It would seem that God, who is “our strength,” is interested in “saving” – that is, offering life, health, and wholeness *wherever* it is needed. No wonder that Mary's son is found, much of the time, among people in desperate need of healing and health. Does this ring a bell?

Why keep this day for a few minutes, an hour, or even more?

I think the story invites us to be open to the unexpected – a challenge for those of us who prefer a well-ordered and predictable schedule.

Right now, it would be good to remember that God is our strength and that we are invited, as Christians, to place our soulful trust in the Triune God (and our bodies and health in the hands of medical expertise).

I appreciate Mary's questioning spirit and wonder if more of that is not needed when voices in high office view this pandemic through rose-colored glasses as well as when we encounter posts or voices on the Internet that spread the weirdest and most inaccurate rumors.

In this trying time, when people indicate that they are "freaking out," would it not be helpful if our greetings to others were marked by an aura of steadfast care and love, rather than panic and stress? You know: channel that inner Gabriel?

My prayer is that the power of the Most High will overshadow all those charged with public service, with providing healthcare, with those who now struggle without work, with those who live in fear of losing their homes or having adequate food for their families, with scientists working over time to discover a vaccine.

Pandemics and panic can lead us to conserve energy and the goods we rely on for daily life. Such conserving energy – understandable when feeling under attack – can also reinforce a focus only on my kin or me alone. What does Mary say: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." Many people are responding to this pandemic with incredible generosity. We want to be counted among them, right?

The readings appointed for this feast

Isaiah 7:10-14

Psalms 40:5-11

Hebrews 10:4-10

http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/HolyDays/Annunc_RCL.html

Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the

throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Prayers

*Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord,
that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ,
announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary,
may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection;
who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Music

The angel Gabriel from heaven came, King's College (Hymnal 1982 265)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pliqObTHxUQ>
Ye who claim the faith of Jesus, Grace Cathedral (Hymnal 1982 268)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB2s7Rv5kxo>

Artwork

The Annunciation: Praying with Art, narrated by Fr. Geoff Wheaton SJ
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxWxnc2Ht2g>
The Iconography of the Virgin Mary
<https://www.christianiconography.info/annunciation.html>

Image 1 Maximus, "The Annunciation," no date, at
<https://feastssaintsmedievalchurch.blogspot.com/search?q=annunciation>
Image 2 He Qi, "The Annunciation," 2014
<https://www.heqiart.com/apps/search?q=annunciation>