

4th Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Annunciation

By Denise Levertov

*'Hail, space for the uncontained God'
From the Agathistos Hymn, Greece,*

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often

those moments

when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child – but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,

only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
perceiving instantly
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power –
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love –

but who was God.

Today as we lit our Advent candle, our focus was on Mary, on her part in the great story of the incarnation, and I'd like us to consider 3 things about Mary and her part in this story. I've given you all a poem, one view of the Annunciation. The poet makes it clear that Mary has to make a choice, to trust God and bear his son, or not. And she makes that choice with great courage. This is her vocation her God-given plan. Each of us also has our part in the story of the Kingdom. Each of us has our own vocation. Our own moment when we are asked to take that pathway which God offers. Probably not as extra-ordinary as the path of Mary, for many of us more of a daily choice to put the Kingdom first or not. To decide where our courage is. There is no compulsion. No manipulation by God, a free choice, as Mary's was.

My second point is about how God chooses to work through the ordinary. Our Gospel reading this morning is a good reminder of how this. A meeting between 2 women, both pregnant with their first child. Mary is an ordinary girl, living an ordinary life, perhaps not who we might have chosen for the background of the saviour of the world. But when we look back through salvation history, we can see the way that God works through people who don't seem natural choices: Moses (a murderer), David (who committed both adultery and murder), Peter (an uneducated fisherman), and even through us, with our chequered histories, and weaknesses. Out of this unlikely material the Kingdom of God is fashioned. There is a riskiness in God's plans, and as our poem points out, it takes courage to say 'yes' to God.

And my third point is about soul-friendship. We all need companions on the path with us. People with whom we can talk about the deep things that happen to us. People who may walk with us for a season, who can understand, or at least empathise with us about the things that are happening to us, and can encourage us, and pray for us when life is challenging.

The challenge for us this morning is to recognise the vocation that God gives us, and to have that courage, that trust in God which enables us to

say 'yes' to God? If we do, God will not leave us without the companionship, care and love that we will need to walk the path