



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Micah 5: 2–3

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Luke 1:26–38 (“The Birth of Jesus Foretold”)

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, favoured 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 favour 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 for ever, 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. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

- 1 *Come, thou long-expected Jesus* (CH:472)
- 2 *Hope is a candle* (CH:284)
- 3 *The race that long in darkness pined* (CH:290)
- 4 *Put peace into each other's hands* (CH:659; tune 598)
- 5 *When out of poverty is born* (CH:291)

In the Name of the Father and of

Whenever I plan out the four Sundays of Advent I am aware of a problem which tends to go unsolved each year. For us in Gladsmuir linked with Longniddry, the Sunday before Christmas is our “Lessons and Carols” service, meaning that there is no space for a sermon. This, in turn, means that each year I miss out on preaching about the second-most important earthly figure in the story of Jesus’ birth: his mother Mary.

This year, however, we are doing a three-part series which started last week with Joseph, moves on next week to Jesus and (surprise, surprise) pauses here today with ... Mary. And with Mary in our thoughts, what a powerful story is offered to us by the Bible.

Just stop to consider this young girl: she is the one who makes God’s great plan possible. No matter how you choose to look at Christmas, if the Incarnation is to mean anything at all, it follows that God must have a means whereby he can arrive in our world as one of us: not an angel with wings and a halo; not an alien with a spaceship; but one of us. And the means which God chooses is his faithful servant, Mary.

Can you begin to imagine what it must have been like for this young woman, barely more than a girl, to be greeted by archangel Gabriel with the news that would change Mary’s life while changing the course of history:

“ ... 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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Down across the centuries, painters have painted and sculptors have sculpted this dramatic moment, known as “The Annunciation” (or, more simply, “the announcement”). But rarely could a painter have created a more beguiling representation of this scene than the picture we have before us today. Henry Ossawa Tanner was a 19th century African-American artist who lived for the bulk of his adult life in France. The son of a preacher and an escaped slave, it is said that 13-year-old Henry saw a landscape painter in his local park and decided that this would be the life for him. His talent blossomed and soon he had made a name for himself depicting biblical scenes on canvas. You can search them out on the internet.

Tanner’s interpretation of the Annunciation is unusual because we simply don’t get to see the angel who has come to visit Mary. Rather, the space where we might expect to find an angelic figure is taken up by energy: a divine bar of white-hot light emerges through not a door frame or an archway, but a solid wall. Do we make out the shape of an emerging figure, slowly making its way into the room. Maybe we do. Or maybe we are mistaken. Who, after all, has ever had an experience quite like this?

If the angel is coming from the heights of heaven, it is clear that he is stooping down to a very humble dwelling. The room in which Mary has been sleeping is simple and sparse, with little furniture to speak of. In fact, it looks very much as though Mary’s bed is a narrow little settee, possibly used by the family for sitting on before the girl gets to claim it for a night-time of possibly quite uncomfortable sleep. This is no rich feather bed.

Take a look at Mary. What is her face telling us? We certainly don’t get a sense of terror at the arrival in her room of a strange, heavenly being. Rather, she seems concerned – curious, even – of what is happening, and there’s an understandable touch of anxiety thrown in too. Yet at this earliest of stages in her angelic encounter, it appears that Mary is open to being approached. She may be young, but she is faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Now put yourself in Mary's situation. You've just said goodnight to your parents and settled down on the narrow bench that is your bed. Suddenly, and without warning you see the wall beginning to glow. The light grows and grows, almost within reach of your feet. The glow turns into a pulsing mass of energy, like a bar of lightning entering into your room – your own personal space. What are you thinking? What are you feeling in that moment of total confusion? If you are anything like me, you are scared out of your senses – terror-struck beyond all imaginings like a horror film and Star Wars rolled into one. But not Mary.

The writer Jane Williams has studied Tanner's painting, and has her own view of Mary's reaction. She thinks that there is:

... a quiet self-possession in Mary's response. This moment is going to have to sustain Mary through the lonely and difficult times ahead. There is the shape of a shelf behind the angel's lighted shoulders, making the outline of a cross; there is no false bargain here, no promise that all will be plain sailing. When, in later years, Mary doubts, as she surely must have done, there will be no one who can remind her of what she heard and said; she is quite alone with the angel. It is striking that Mary asks for no promises for herself, she simply seeks assurance that angels know how human babies come into existence, and then she says, 'Yes.'

We don't need to guess at Mary's reaction to her angelic visitor. We have our Bibles in front of us, just as Henry Tanner obviously had his own Bible open by his easel. Like him, we can read on and see what happens next. And what happens is that Mary launches into a hymn of praise to God, "the Magnificat", found in Luke chapter 1, verses 46 to 55. Here Mary recognises in the plainest of language that God has chosen to do an amazing thing through her, an ordinary young Judean woman. In bearing the Son of God, this lowly handmaiden will play her part in a great plan which will set human history on a new course.

A new course? Well yes, because nothing like this has ever been seen before, though in truth God's course is a very, very old course, spoken of by the prophets of old, and looked to from the very dawn of Creation. And right at the heart of this brave new plan are Jesus and the woman who will carry him: Mary, who understands God's great bias to the poor:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

And so Mary trusts with a trust that looks to a future so much brighter than the past. She trusts that the suffering and hardship of this life – which she almost certainly knew herself – will not have the last word ... not now! She trusts that the news passed on by her angelic visitor is truly Good News. Above all, she trusts that God's vision for the coming Messiah will be one which is going to change everything.

In Mary's reaction to the angel's message we find a poor young girl courageously throwing in her lot with the Maker of the universe. It will not be easy, and in time there will be discord and a great many tears, but this humble servant of God is ready to do what is asked of her in order to bring into the light a plan which for so very long had been cloaked in shadow ... the shadow of the ages.

This is the start of something momentous, with the world finding its true meaning in a tiny child named Jesus ... son of Mary ... and Son of God. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God, living God,
on this second Sunday of Advent we pray for peace – the peace that begins
in our own hearts when we trust in you, wait for you, as Mary did.

For we know that from that peace came the Prince of Peace,
the promise of peace for all.

Open our eyes to ourselves that we might see and feel the suffering of others:
those in deepest need of peace, who are homeless, penniless, lonely, comfortless;
those compelled to leave their countries,
desperate enough to take to dangerous seas in flimsy vessels;
those whose hope has dimmed to darkness and whose sorrow weighs heaviest.

We pray from the depth of our hearts for peace for all,
for we know you are with us and that with you nothing is impossible.

Through the peace of your son Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.



“The Annunciation” (1898)
(Henry Ossawa Tanner, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)