

***A Voice in the Darkness: Do Not Be Afraid***

Luke 1:26-56; *Annunciation*, by Denise Levertov

Parker Palmer is a Quaker educator. He's written many books I treasure, and he started a small group movement called "circles of trust". He sometimes says, "When the going gets rough, turn to wonder." Which means, when someone acts or speaks in a way that you do not understand, when the way they think annoys or irritates you, or just seems incomprehensible, try *not* doing what we usually do—which is to judge and condemn them for their wrongheadedness. Instead, he says, "turn to wonder." Ask yourself, "I wonder what he's trying to tell me about himself. I wonder what she's wrestling with when she says that." And sometimes the right question is, "I wonder why I'm reacting so strongly to this?"

It takes self-discipline to *wonder* for a while about things we don't understand right away. We're inclined to jump quickly to our judgments: "That's good" or "I don't like that". Categorizing things—good or bad, like me or not like me—helps us to make a strange new thing or person or idea fit into our picture of the world. It helps eliminate the shadows that come with something we don't understand. *Wonder* is a willingness to wait, to sit for a while with not knowing, not understanding. Wonder is knowing something that's really true: that there are some things that are bigger than us, beyond our ability take in all at once.

*Wonder* is a word that is used several times in the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth, especially the stories of his mother Mary. Mary watched and listened to the strange things that were happening to her. She "pondered them in her heart," which means, I imagine, that she wondered silently about why her life didn't seem more "normal", whether what was happening to her was really the way things were supposed to work.

Unlike our Catholic brothers and sisters, we Protestants don't focus much on Mary. But in the traditions that talk about her more, Mary is honored because of the way she took in God's shocking news for her life. She's the model of what it looks like to respond willingly, faithfully, when your life gets turned upside down in a way you didn't plan for yourself at all.

Like the other stories we've talked about this Advent, Mary's story too begins with the words "Do not be afraid." I wonder if the angels say that because every time God shows up, it surprises us, maybe even scares us a little. It's just not what we expect in our ordinary human life. And then whatever God or the angel says is always a little crazy-sounding. When an angel shows up, you can pretty much bet it's there to move you someplace, open you up to something you weren't expecting.

"Greetings, favored one," this angel began. "Do not be afraid, Mary...but I have something very odd to tell you, something that sounds impossible. You're going to have a baby...and his name will be Jesus."

This story is called, in the ancient tradition, the *Annunciation*—the announcement that God would be born into the world. This child will be something special, the angel said. He will be

called the Son of God. He'll remind you of King David. (David was the wisest and most powerful king who had ever lived, in the history that Mary knew.) Jesus' kingdom, the angel said, will be the kingdom of all God's people, and that kingdom will never, ever end. (Which was a fantastical statement all by itself. Even King David's reign had ended, long since. And why was this angel talking about politics, anyway?)

What the angel was suggesting was that something powerful, world-changing, was about to happen. Would Mary have understood that? Probably not. The story suggests that Mary was 14 or 15 when all of this happened; that's the age at which girls were usually engaged to be married. There's nothing in the biblical story to suggest that Mary was an extraordinary child, or that she had been getting herself ready for an exceptional destiny. She's *Saint* Mary now, but no doubt she started out human and imperfect, just like us. Even Jesus seems to have snapped at her a couple of times when she pushed him in that way only mothers can do.

But the stories suggest something extravagantly peaceful and gracious about her character: how she took responsibility—but not too much—for her mysterious child; the way she watched shepherds and wise men come and go, and listened to them with wonder—“pondering all these things in her heart.” Whatever she was like before, it's like in that annunciation, the angel brought her a new picture of herself, for her to grow into. As if her first “yes” to the angel—“Here I am; let it be with me just as you said”—was an opening to let God reshape her—not just once, but again and again. Like her answer to that angel put her on a long road to becoming someone who could carry the presence of God inside of her.

Denise Levertov, who is a poet living now, wrote the poem we read a few minutes ago as a reflection on the annunciation story. Her poem too is titled *Annunciation*. She asks,

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

Maybe, but how would I recognize an annunciation if it happened to me? Maybe it *has* happened to me, and I've missed it! I wonder how many people the angel approached *before* getting to Mary—before anyone said “Yes, I will do what you ask.”

An annunciation, an announcement from God—whether to Mary or to any of us—is always a call to be different. I don't think angels show up to tell us to eat tomato soup instead of a sandwich for lunch today. They come to invite us to change somehow, to participate in something that looks like an exorbitant promise, an unrealistic dream, something that rearranges the world—or at least our world. An annunciation calls us to be part of something new, something only God can make happen.

The poet says,

*...we are told of [Mary's] meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage  
The ...Spirit  
did not enter her without consent. God waited.*

*She was free*

*to accept or refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.*

I have no doubt that after the angel stopped speaking, there was a moment of silence, an open space in that conversation, before Mary answered. “Will you do it?” was the unspoken question that came with the angel’s pronouncement. She was free to accept or to refuse, as we all are, always. We know Mary’s story because she said yes. But what about all the other things that must have rushed through her mind, or that we might have said—most of them beginning with the words, “Yes, but...”?

- Yes, but I’m much too young (or old, or busy—you fill in the blank).  
Yes, but I’m engaged to someone, and there’s no way to explain this without hurting him terribly (which is to say, I have people who depend on me, people who expect me not to change).
- Yes, but what you propose is so much more complicated than it seems.
- Yes, this is a nice idea, but I’m pretty sure it’s impossible.

“Yes, but” is powerful. It often wins. When we say it, it makes us feel prudent and competent and realistic. And “yes, but” can stop an angel cold.

*...often those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
[they] 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.*

We are not powerful enough to stop what the angel comes to bring. God will find a way to make true his extravagant promise of life and love for all, forgiveness we can’t imagine ourselves offering, hope that is big enough to take in this whole earth. But we are free to deny our place in those promises. We can hold on to our “yes, but’s” until they completely obscure the promise. As the poet says, there will be no punishment for saying ‘no’. It is not God’s way. But “the gate closes, the pathway vanishes.” The moment for our own transformation can pass, if we choose to let it.

Mary said “yes.” No “but.” Just “yes.”

*[She was] 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...*

I've never seen anything that I would call an angel. I've never heard God's voice in the same way that I can hear your voice, or my own. But there have been plenty of moments when I've felt inspired to do something I've never done before, or had a generous impulse to go out of my way, or to give away more than I thought I could afford—and I've let the moment pass. For my own lack of courage, I have closed the door to "the astounding ministry I was offered." I've done it by my own inaction, or my fear of change, or my very conscientious "Yes, but you know, there are a lot of reasons that might not work."

But I can also point to a few—just a few—moments in my life when I've found the grace to say, maybe a little like Mary, just "yes". Yes, I will do something that feels scary. Yes, I will let go of wanting to know how everything is going to work out in the long run. Yes, I can just sit with wonder for a while, wait and see what new thing is coming.

I bet you've had moments like that too, when you have been willing to speak "yes" into the darkness. These are the moments that change our lives. These are the moments when God is born again—the God who is ridiculously unpredictable. The God who never leaves well enough alone, the God who will always surprise us and make us wonder if we heard it right. The God who begins every message to us by saying, "Do not be afraid." The God who is waiting to be born again—into this world. Into us.

***Annunciation***  
By Denise Levertov

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,

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.

This was the moment no one speaks of,  
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,  
                    Spirit,  
                            suspended,  
                                    waiting.

She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'  
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'  
She did not submit with gritted teeth,  
                                    raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,  
                            consent illumined her.  
The room filled with its light,  
the lily glowed in it,  
                            and the iridescent wings.

Consent,  
                    courage unparalleled,  
opened her utterly.