

SACRED ART
Sermon for Advent 4B-Luke 1:26-38
LPC, 12/24/17

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. 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... The Holy Spirit will come upon you; therefore the child to be born will be called Son of God.”

Those words, spoken by the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary, have struck wonder and awe into hearts ever since Mary herself. Like Mary, we ask, “How can this be?” and not just because virgins don’t get pregnant. That is wonder enough. But the big wonder is that in this moment, related to us from the Gospel of Luke, humanity and divinity are forever, wondrously, awfully, mysteriously and indivisibly joined.

This, quite frankly, is incomprehensible. The definitions of humanity and divinity are mutually exclusive: oil and water, alkaline and acid, life and death, pregnant and not pregnant. You can’t be both at the same time. In fact, just a few months ago, when the confirmation class and I were discussing the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully God, the young people expressed a becoming incredulity. And this wasn’t because they were too young to understand the concept. *Nobody* understands this concept.

But nothing is impossible for God. So the impossible truth of the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary remains for us to grapple with.

Artists are perhaps the best equipped to grapple with impossible truths, because artists don’t have to confine themselves to the vocabulary of the empirically provable. Artists don’t have to be objective. Artists can be unabashedly subjective. They communicate with images, feelings, sensations, not words and equations.

That is why, in doing my research for this sermon, I eschewed verbal analyses of the biblical text and looked for images to give me a vocabulary for talking with you about the Annunciation. There is no dearth of such images. In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of Annunciation images. To narrow my field, I limited myself to modern depictions of the Annunciation, with one exception.

That exception was a 13th-century representation from the hand of the Sienese artist Duccio, which I consulted just to establish a baseline for the traditional representation of this subject. In this image, the Virgin Mary, clad modestly in a blue robe with her hair covered, is interrupted in her reading of the prophet Isaiah by a winged angel of indeterminate gender proffering a lily, the symbol of purity. Mary’s hands are lifted in surprise, but her expression is serene. The setting is a simple, 13th century interior, and the atmosphere is very still, befitting the solemnity of the occasion. In fact, it is almost airless, giving an eternal, ageless quality to the image.

My research indicates that this was the standard vocabulary for depicting the Annunciation until the middle of the 19th century. The dominant themes in this tradition are

Mary's modesty, purity, simplicity and serenity, and her grounding in Old Testament prophecy. The tone is solemn, quiet and eternal.

Not surprisingly, treatment of this subject evolves in the modern era, although the Annunciation clearly remains a compelling subject for artists, particularly, as we approach the present, for women artists. One of the first things you begin to notice, even before the beginning of the 20th century, is a shifting emphasis to Mary's emotions. In an 1850 rendition by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the young Mary looks frozen with fear, shoulders hunched against a wall. A contemporary image by American artist James C. Christenson shows Mary in much the same posture.

Early 20th century paintings by Ukrainian Alexander Murashko and French artist Luc Olivier Merson emphasize Mary's surprise, while the African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner shows Mary's incredulity and vulnerability. Contemporary artists in the Catholic tradition emphasize Mary's awe.

Some contemporary Catholics depict Jesus already within Mary's body, a sort of holy X-ray. One, Elizabeth Wang does this to emphasize the indisputable humanity of the unborn child, in other words, her depiction of the Annunciation is a statement against abortion.

For other contemporary artists, the subject of the Annunciation has inspired radical combinations of color, pattern and composition. No longer is Mary's robe always a modest blue, but sometimes the most exuberant shades of red, the color of joy. It is as if the world-changing event of Mary's miraculous pregnancy has blown the doors off of artistic convention.

Some of the most interesting depictions are from outside the Western tradition. Chinese, Indian and Cameroonian artists show the angel and Mary in the settings and styles familiar to their own culture. The message is that Jesus belongs to everyone. By seeing Jesus and Mary with the same skin color, clothing and surroundings as themselves, these artists are understanding, and communicating, the full humanity of Jesus: his brotherhood with all humankind.

The final category of Annunciation paintings I found emphasize Mary's youth in a contemporary setting. John Collier's picture shows Mary in a jumper and saddle shoes. In a Murals-Without-Borders poster, the angel drives a convertible up to a fast food take-out window, where Mary waits to take his order. Gottfried Heinwein, an Austrian, and Maximus, a precocious high-school-age blogger, pick up on the tradition that Mary was supposed to be interrupted while reading the prophet Isaiah. Recognizing that young girls are not as likely to be reading codices these days, Heinwein shows the angel emerging from a computer monitor, while Maximus has Mary listening to her iPod, traditional blue robe and all.

What these contemporary artists are showing is that the angel's message to Mary is a message for all time. It is a going thing, not a quaint story safely bound by tradition. Mary is a sacred vessel, but she's also a person just like us, living in the finitude of our own time and place, just as scared, just as surprised, just as incredulous as we are. Which means that in God's eyes, we are sacred too. For God nothing is impossible. As impregnable as our tough old-maid hearts are, Jesus will be born in them if God has anything to do with it.