

Regain the Gift of Being Shocked

A reflection on Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary

Luke 1:26-38
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 23, 2018

Our focus throughout the season of Advent this year has been a bit different. Starting with the passages concerning John the Baptist preparing the way for the long-awaited Messiah, we have approached these weeks before Christmas Day as a sort of journey through the wilderness. Advent, we've experienced, shares common ground with the season of Lent, as a season of preparation. As such, we have been invited to a time of reflection upon our own spiritual journey, as individuals and as a community of faith.

From a spirituality perspective, the purpose of such reflection is to help us reconnect with God. And from a progressive theological standpoint, I'd add: connecting as you understand the nature and character of God. Writer, poet, and artist Jan Richardson frames it as **a time to let go of what insulates us from God.** I like that.

The hectic pace of the month of December, being what it has become in this country, can be such a distraction that it's not hard to get sidetracked in taking time to reflect on our own journey of faith. And I will admit, it has been even harder than usual for many of us to feel the desire to reflect upon this past year. Beyond the personal, look what's happened just within the past week in our nation's capital – a government shutdown over the U.S-Mexico border wall, as well as key resignations in the administration. The Associated Press just released its Top News Stories of 2018. They include:

- the Saudi-authorized journalist Khashoggi killing,
- the Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings,
- climate change issues – including the historically devastating California wildfires, destructive east coast hurricanes, and other natural disasters
- the ever-continuing drama coming out of Robert Mueller's Trump-Russia probe,
- the continuing revelations and consequences of the #MeToo movement, involving sexual misconduct
- the midterm elections
- the non-stop parade of mass shootings, including the one last February at a Parkland, Florida high school,
- and the zero-tolerance U.S. Immigration policy at our Mexico border that resulted in more than 2,500 migrant children being separated from their families. And as some of us have perceived it, kept in cages.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of all this is that so many people in this nation are becoming so desensitized and numb to such horrible news that we are losing our capacity to be shocked by any of this. Anger, outrage, even disgust, yes. But outright shock and surprise, not as much.

I learned a new term during a Worship & Music ministry team meeting when we were discussing this theme for Advent. It's called the **Tyson Zone**. It refers back to the barrage of bizarre headlines following the actions of heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson a few years ago. Coined by popular sports columnist Bill Simmons, the Sports Guy, the online UrbanDictionary.com defines the Tyson Zone this way. "The point at which a celebrity's behavior becomes so insane, that there is literally nothing they could do that would any longer shock or surprise you, or indeed any human being." When it comes to daily headlines, perhaps we've reached the Tyson Zone. **Is there any headline that we couldn't believe anymore?** I don't think so. Have we lost, then, our ability to experience sheer awe, shock, and even wonder?

All this may sound like a very strange introduction to today's biblical story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary announcing that she will conceive a child. But it may serve as a way for us to **reclaim the gift of being shocked and surprised**. This story is meant to share "a mysterious moment when heaven and earth momentarily meet and God chooses an ordinary young woman as an instrument of God's mercy and love and grace, a moment for which words and concepts and intellectual propositions are hopelessly inadequate, and which art and music come much closer to expressing. The encounter with Mary reminds us that God cares deeply about the human condition. God chose a modest, nondescript young woman. God, we learn, chooses to be with the modest and marginal, the poor and weak, the humble and forgotten. Mary reminds us that God can use modest men and women, young and old, who do not seem to have much to commend them, not much that the world recognizes as important and powerful. Mary reminds us that we should expect God to show up, not only in inspired worship, beautiful art and music, and fancy theology, but where the poor people are forgotten, vulnerable people oppressed, weak people overlooked. Mary is part of a movement that is more than a political agenda advocating for human rights, equal justice, and the excruciatingly difficult work of peacemaking. Mary is a reminder of the most distinctive characteristic of biblical faith, namely, the profound compassion and love of God." (John Buchanan, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year B*)

How you and I respond to that loving Presence in our life, how we ponder all these things in our hearts, like Mary did, helps determine a way of life in which we can live more fully in the moment, a way we can experience the shocking Presence of God working in and through your life and mine, and in the life of this congregation.

Referring back to Jan Richardson, she sees this story of Gabriel's visit to Mary as revealing how Mary, and we, can make a home for God. And it all begins, Richardson says, with what she calls Mary's "awful and wondrous Yes." That is how she closes her poem, "A Blessing for After," that we heard read this morning during the lighting of the Advent Wreath. Richardson speaks of the blessing that arises after clarity has come, after you have agreed to what seemed impossible, after illumination departs and you realize there is no map for the path ahead, but that you garner the courage to set out anyway. The blessing goes with you and from time to time you hold it up to remind yourself of the radiance that came when you gave your awful and wondrous yes.

Again, from a spirituality perspective, I believe this blessing is the realization that you and I are indeed a home for God. Perhaps we need to give God an awful and wondrous “yes” in realization of that fact. Richardson reflects:

The story of the annunciation to Mary tells us of how, with her own body, Mary makes a home for God. The medium of her own flesh becomes a habitation for the holy. It's not simply her willingness to become pregnant and give birth to Jesus, however, that makes Mary someone who provides a dwelling for God. When Gabriel first greets her, he says to her, “The Lord is with you.” Already God has found a home with her.

Mary's yes to Gabriel, her assent to God, her willingness to make a home for the divine within her own self: these all give the lie to a history that has too often depicted her as meek and mild. Her response to God, and the work that she takes up, are the actions of a prophet, in the ancient Hebrew sense of it: one who recognized the presence of God in the world, who points it out to others, who does not give up hope that the people will come to know God. Meekness and mildness are not enough to sustain Mary in the prophetic work God has called her to do.

Likewise, our ministry here at College Hill, and most likely in your own life, is also one that takes courage, risk, and faith to believe we are doing the work God is calling us to do. So, perhaps we need to take a closer look at the verse of scripture where the angel Gabriel declares to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Richardson concludes, “**Overshadow, inhabit, dwell: this is how the Spirit works, seeking to make a home among us.** One that is not an exclusive walled shelter, either... It is a spacious home that, like Mary, we are challenged to offer: a dwelling that reveals the Presence of God rather than hiding it away.

- So how is God seeking to make a home in you in this season?
- How is God asking you and our faith community to give birth to the holy?
- What audacious yes might God be inviting you to offer?
- How does making a home for the Sacred help you find a place for yourself in this world?
- What sustains you in this prophetic and pastoral work?

In this and every season, may we, like Mary, be a home for the God who desires to dwell with us” and within us. And perhaps, this will help us to regain the gift of being shocked, of being able to ponder all these things in our hearts.

Blessings, indeed!
Amen.