

Readings

2 Sm 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29

Rom 16:25-27

Lk 1:26-38

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How many times have we heard this before, the Annunciation? Perhaps we skip ahead, because we know how it goes: the pious, chaste girl praying at her bedside or reading scripture, gowned in blue, when an angel appears, calmly and childlike.

Or maybe we hear others say, what nonsense, it's just another myth, just a way to help the naïve along. And perhaps we think something like that, too. A nice story about a girl and an angel, but nothing too serious.

But let us go back and pause and watch the action unfold. Let us recall, with fresh eyes, what God is actually doing here and reflect upon the way in which God has chosen to enter into the world and dwell among us.

Let us go, then, to Nazareth, in northern Israel, where we see a small cluster of simple mudbrick homes and people working in the surrounding fields.

Let us go to Nazareth, a mere backwater town at the edge of the powerful Roman Empire.

Now see Mary, say, coming in from her work and going to lay down in the afternoon for a rest before dinner, and let us see her there in the room while the spring sun is low and warm and casting shadows into the small windows cut out from the mudbrick walls. She is young, maybe no more than sixteen. She will soon be married and perhaps, when she lies down, tired from work, she is thinking of these things.

Now, as Mary is resting, in the small room of a mudbrick home in a poor village at the edge of the Roman Empire, an angel suddenly appears. And Mary is troubled, for angels are mighty and fearsome creatures. What did she see that caused her to be troubled? Perhaps it looked like the angel leading Moses and the Israelites out of slavery, or the angel who stayed the hand of Abraham about to sacrifice his son. Or maybe it appeared as a bright piercing light.

The angel, seeing her troubled look, says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary.” Then he says, “You will conceive and bear a son, and God will give him the throne of David and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

So Mary is given a message about bearing a son who will become king. Maybe, now, she is calling to mind the current rule under which she lives, an empire that dominated the Mediterranean, and the Roman soldiers she would pass in the streets. She could see their threats and their violence and she knew the high taxes they demanded. She could have thought this and perhaps wondered, how could a king come from Nazareth? How could his kingdom be a match to Rome’s?

She knew, after all, how David’s kingdom had ended; how far they were from that first kingdom, unified under David, 1000 years before her time, when peace settled over the land and the relationship between God and humanity grew strong. But now, the throne of David had long since collapsed and been torn apart and the people once exiled always asking when God would again lead them.

But she also knew about the prophecies, of a new David, and so perhaps would have wondered, what about these prophecies, what about the prophecy of Nathan...

And Mary, in the midst of this, remembers Joseph, her soon to be husband, and how they aren’t yet living together, and is brought back to the basic reality of how this son would even be conceived. So, she asks, boldly and simply, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”

And the angel responds: the Holy Spirit will come over you. The Holy Spirit will come over you like it did at the beginning of creation when it hovered over the black abyss and brought forth life. The power of the Most High will overshadow as with the Israelites in the wilderness when God's glory dwelt among the people and protected them and led them from slavery to the promised land. You, Mary, the angel says, will become the new place where God dwells. In your womb, God will dwell, and from you, life will be brought forth, and all people will know the glory of God.

In that moment, what was she thinking? Did she again turn her mind to Joseph and wonder what he would say and how he would feel? Did she wonder about the scandal this could cause her family? Did she wonder why God would pick her?

Whatever her thoughts may have been, she says, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word." She utters the words that we all wish to utter, when things seem impossible and we have no idea where we are being led: Lord, I do your will.

Then, perhaps more frightening than the angel's arrival is its departure, for then Mary is left alone, in the late afternoon quiet, and must step out into the world with the Son of God conceived in her womb.

At this moment, and on this day, we are led to the edge of Christmas, the way by which God assures his fidelity to humanity, in this long-suffering plan for Christ to be conceived in a poor, young woman in a backwater town at the edge of the Roman Empire and so change the world.