

Advent 4 A
December 24, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

I had a clergy friend who invented something like an “un-pageant” at Christmastime. In this small church where there really weren't any children to take parts in the kind of pageant we're used to, he invited the congregation into a different kind of experience. He asked for volunteers who would be willing to be Mary, Joseph, wise men, shepherds and the like, and then he took on the role of “casting director” for a play. He had each volunteer stand and then he described the part.

For instance, “You are a shepherd. You're sort of a cultural outsider – in a job that doesn't get a lot of respect. In fact, few self-respecting people would want to be known as a shepherd. You're out there in the cold with your animals, not long on hope or resources. You don't get a lot of good news in this job. But on this night, something extraordinary happens. This is a much different kind of night....

You get the idea.

Now in this un-pageant, nobody ever had to act out a part. There were no sets or costumes or special lighting, nothing to memorize. But in another way, everybody was invited into each part. Invited to ponder what that role was – and how it might speak to his or her experience. Have I ever felt like that marginalized shepherd with the low-status job, feeling on the outs, stuck in a field with a bunch of dirty animals? What must it have been like to hear such incredible good news from the angels? What was it like to have an infusion of hope?

I'm wondering what it would be like to look at today's gospel like an un-pageant. A pageant that at one level doesn't ask us to act out the part, but at another level asks us to take

that part into ourselves – into that place within ourselves where our hopes and fears and joys and disappointments live – and let that role speak to us. In this case, it is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

So this is the role: You are a teenage Palestinian girl – probably interested in the things that teenagers of that time were interested in. You are engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. You are at home one day, when you have a feeling that gives you chills – a presence in the room with you that is both holy and scary at the same time. And this being – an angel – speaks to you. “Hello, lovely young woman, child of God.”

You are absolutely blown away by this. Terrified and curious at the same time. What is this angel here for? The angel reassures you. “Do not be afraid,” he says.

“Sure,” you think.

And then he goes on to describe why he is there. It is a surprise and a puzzlement. You are to become pregnant and give birth to a son named Jesus. A child who will be called the son of God.

And you wonder how in the world that can happen. You have no experience with a man. This is impossible. But again the angel assures you that God will take care of this in a way that only God can --through the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit.

None of this makes any sense. You have a huge decision – a holy decision – and you didn’t ask for any of this to happen to you. Could this be occurring? What do you do? What do you choose?

And then you know. You say, “Yes.” It is a courageous choice. “I am ready to serve. Let it be as you say.”

How does this role touch our lives as we sit with it? Does it remind us of times when God has asked something of us? Something hard? Something we really didn't understand?

Something that took courage to embrace? Maybe even something that frightened us a little?

A few of years ago I became fascinated with paintings of the annunciation. In some this encounter between Mary and Gabriel looks quite formal. Mary and the angel, both very well dressed like royalty, face one another with arms folded, almost nodding toward one another and she listens intently. In others, Mary looks alarmed – really disturbed by this message that seems to make no sense. In a fresco that I saw in Assisi, the angel kneels before Mary in a gesture of blessing while Mary shrinks back, as if she were sorting it all out. In a well-known Rossetti painting, the angel with a lily stands before Mary, who is clearly in peasant garb, while Mary almost recoils from him.

One of my favorites isn't from the classics of art, but from a children's book simply called 'The Nativity.' The angel (who wears hiking boots and has huge, tattered wings) sprawls in a kitchen chair while he and Mary meet over a cup of tea. Mary, wearing bedroom slippers, seems to be asking questions as she tries to understand this message. Somehow I like the idea of the angel coming to tea in a simple but warm kitchen to make this mystery-filled request of Mary.

Where has God met you when you were presented with a big decision? How did you know what choice to make? How was that choice in some way "pregnant with God?" Pregnant with possibility?

Denise Levertov has caught a lot of the connection between the annunciation to Mary and the annunciations we have known in her poem "Annunciation."

She asks,

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
these 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 continues, speaking of Mary:)

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 astonishing 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.

