

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (20.12.20)
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2 Samuel 7.1-11.16; Luke 1.26-38

As those of us with school-aged children staggered over the finish line on Friday, I think our collective heart went out to the teachers. For as they also prepared, finally, to down tools after a hard-won term, they were told that a) they need to prepare to carry out mass Covid-testing and b) the start of the next term might be delayed. Teachers, teaching assistants and support staff: however you are feeling now – and whatever awaits you when you get back – we all applaud your incredible commitment and tenacity.

These last few days of term would usually have involved carol concerts, nativity plays and other Christmas performances: and, for rather obvious reasons, these haven't been able to happen in the same way. And so, you might well have experienced a pang of nostalgia on hearing that passage from Luke's Gospel: the first scene of any traditional nativity play. Maybe you, like me, have stood outside the school gates waiting for a child to come out and tell you what part they've got this year. 'Mummy, Mummy, I'm....I'm....I'm.....A NARRATOR!' Not that there's anything wrong with the narrators, of course: but who wouldn't want to be the angel Gabriel, tasked with the message that would turn the very earth on its axis? Or Mary – accepting with a mixture of bewilderment and good grace the fate that was offered to her?

Ah, Mary. Mother of God. Blessed Virgin Mary. Queen of Heaven. Our Lady. Whatever name you have for her; whatever doctrine you subscribe to about her; whatever doubts you may have about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus; what we find in Luke's Gospel is a moment of profound intimacy between a woman and the divine life.

The only problem is that this intimacy is obscured by the layers of over-familiarity. Gabriel strides onto the scene, presents Mary with a proposal and a conversation ensues. And so, we need really to turn to the work of the poets to help us imagine what this encounter may have been like, and what its implications may be for us.

In this extract from her poem, 'The Anunciation', Denise Levertov leads us gently in.

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

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.

God comes into the home of Mary: enters her life, her experience, and draws near. This handmaid of the Lord is herself waited upon by the author of creation: the unfolding of salvation hinging on her choice. And the light of her 'yes' takes over; everything is transformed by it, even the angel. Mary begins to blossom, with the promise of a new beginning.

Intimacy, openings and little beginnings: these seem to be such important features of the way in which God has always brought the divine life to bear on our human lives. I'm pretty sure that's why Luke's Gospel has been paired with the reading from 2 Samuel in our annual cycle: in order to remind us that the initiative is always God's, and that it is an initiative borne out of patience and faithfulness. David feels guilty about living in a grand house while the ark of God stays in a tent and he decides to make amends. And God says to David, 'Are *you* the one to build *me* a house to live in? No thanks! I'll build *you* a house, a great dynasty, and your throne will be established forever.' A plan formed at least a thousand years before Jesus came on the scene.

Intimacy, openings and little beginnings. One of the best books I read this year was one called *'In the Shelter: Finding a home in the world'* by the poet and theologian Padraig O Tuama. In it, Padraig writes about the time when his own mother met Mary (I hope you don't mind me quoting it at length).

'And now', he writes, 'my own mother's mother was dead. The afternoon that my mother met the mother of God the house was quiet. My mother, with her

eight-times-stretched womb, was wrapped around its emptiness. She woke from an afternoon sleep to the sound of a woman coming into the room. The woman was in her seventies, dressed in tweed and soft clothes, grey hair...She was like and unlike my mother's mother and my mother knew her to be Mary, the Mother of God. It's a tremendously intimate thing to have someone sit on the corner of your bed when you are remembering death. My mother describes the weight of the woman as she sat on the bed where she lay. The woman looked at my mother. She said, 'You never liked me much, did you?' My mother said, 'No. You reminded me too much of someone else.' The woman with hair the colour of iron said, 'That's okay.' (In a moment)..the woman was gone. The Mother of God. Mother of the Word Incarnate. The Star of the Sea. It didn't cause an earthquake of recovery, there was more time needed and rest, because grief is a tiring thing. But it was a little beginning.'

There's something incredibly poignant about this encounter that mirrors what happens between Mary and Gabriel. The divine life - again - comes in, draws near, envelopes itself in the reality of what it means to be human. There is pondering and perplexity, unfinished business, and the most imperceptible green shoot of life.

'Aren't there annunciations of some sort or another in most lives?' asks Levertov, elsewhere in her poem. Maybe this rings true for you. Maybe you can call to mind moments like this that have happened to you, though perhaps less dramatically: moments of possibility that have emerged out of nowhere; moments of quiet invitation; moments in which the life of heaven draws near to earth, leaving you to ponder what this might have meant.

We are living through times in which life feels particularly tough and choices conflicted; where people are separated from those they love; where the present is frightening and the future uncertain; where grief has been magnified by the loss of close connection. And yet what Luke's Gospel gives us today is perhaps the thing we most need to hear: the promise of the divine life coming into our homes, into our experience of hardship, isolation and loss, and offering us intimacy, openings and little beginnings. And let's not forget that, from little beginnings, the Almighty has done very great things.

Amen.