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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Advent 4B
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.

~Meister Eckhart ~

Today we come close to the mystery of Christmas by reading and hearing the Annunciation – the announcement of the incarnation by the angel Gabriel.

It is only in Luke that we find this story – a story about an angel of God arriving in a particular time, in a particular place, to a particular woman, and proclaiming miraculous news.

For some of us this story is a bit like a rough wool sweater – it keeps us warm but it's itchy. Details of this account get under the skin of our brains – the whole issue of the virgin birth, the image of Mary as meek and passive, the complexity of a baby who will be both human and divine.

For others of us this story is more like finely woven silk scarf – it wraps around us and gives us unnamable comfort. We hear phrases like 'Greetings, favored one!' and 'Do not be afraid.' – like – 'How can this be?' and 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' – and our hearts are glad.

When we approach a mystery and engage the miraculous, I think it's best to have both the sweater and the scarf at hand – that we pay attention to the itch in our brains, and the warmth of our hearts, as we make meaning again from oft familiar images.

As far as miraculous birth stories go, this meeting between Gabriel and Mary is nothing special. In fact, it reads almost exactly like the announcements of the wondrous births of Ishmael, Samson, and John the Baptist.

Each of these stories follows a consistent pattern: first, the appearance of a divine figure; next, fear or confusion in the one to whom the figure appears; after that, the announcement of the message; which leads to the objection by the one receiving the message; and finally a concluding promise or blessing from the divine figure.

We see exactly this in today's story. Knowing the pattern is interesting, and some might say important – it can scratch our intellectual itch to try and create order in something that is too big to fully know – but the story of Gabriel and Mary cannot simply be reduced to the formula.

This story is something more.

And I think the reason for this, is *because of Mary*.

Mary. Mother of God. The Queen of Heaven. The Blessed Virgin. We have those and so many more names for her. Mary is perhaps one of the most described, constructed, deconstructed, debated, loved, and misunderstood people in the Bible.

She gave us the *Magnificat*. Her story is woven throughout her sons'. She was with Jesus as he was crucified.

And in this annunciation story today, we see her **question** and **claim** her faith. It is through those acts that we see the seeds of the woman she will become, teaching Jesus at her knee. And that is *why Mary*.

How can this be?

In the twelve verses we heard, Mary is described as favored, perplexed, thoughtful, and afraid. And yet her first words are clear, and they are a question – *how can this be?*

This is the question of the faithful. It is a reminder of mystery and miracle. It is a call to pay attention to the itchiness and to seek answers – to question – and to not let our relationship with God get too comfortable.

Mary steps out of the formula, not in her objection to the message, but by her ability to question with faith – by her choice to engage rather than dissemble. She begins with her head, but her heart is soon to follow.

Here am I.

Mary has the last word. At the end of this scene we see played out, she says yes. But not in a passive way – the way we are often told to see and understand her response. Look again. See her **question**, and then see her **claim**.

She takes on the mission given to her with her eyes open. She has heard Gabriel's message and she knows that nothing is impossible with God. As clearly as Isaiah answered God's call of 'Whom shall I send?' so does Mary answer. Here I am, send me. *Here am I.*

In those three words Mary claims both her mission and her vocation – both of which for her are to be the *Theotokos*.

Of all the names given to Mary, this is my favorite. *Theotokos*. Coming from the Orthodox tradition it literally means *God-bearer* or *one who gives birth to God*. Mary claimed this because upon hearing the proclamation of what she was to do and become – and after pondering and questioning – she knew that her only answer was *yes*, because it was consistent with who she was meant to be in the world.

We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.

These words from 13th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart are an annunciation to us. And we like Mary must question and claim if we are going to fulfill our vocation as Christians.

We all have different questions to ask. How can it be? Where shall I go? What am I to do? Whom should I serve?

Yes, they are different for each of us, and yet they all lead us back to the waters of our baptism and the promises made at the font. Like Mary, our questions are rooted in our faith.

And asking those questions will inevitably lead us to claim our faith. Whether we say ‘here am I’ or ‘I will with God’s help’ or *yes*, or whatever – we will join Mary in bearing God into this world.

Mary was called by Gabriel to be the *Theotokos* in a specific way, in a specific time and specific place. But as Eckhart points out to us, we are all of us meant to be *theotokos*.

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This year we jump directly from the Annunciation to the manger – not leaving any room for pondering this story. But I invite you in the Christmas season to come to remember Mary: her courage in the face of a life-changing angelic visit; her calm in the chaos of birth; and her love for Jesus, which fed him for his journey.

And pray about how you will bear God's love in a world so desperately in need of hope.

~ AMEN ~