

***The Darkness That Leads to 'Yes'***

Luke 1:26-35,38; *Annunciation*, by Denise Levertov

Parker Palmer, the Quaker educator who has written many books I treasure and who started a small group movement called “circles of trust”, sometimes says, “When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.” Which means, when someone acts or speaks in a way that you just don’t understand at all, when their thinking that is so different from yours annoys or irritates you, or just seems incomprehensible, try *not* doing what we usually do—which is to judge and condemn them for their wrongheadedness. Instead, he says, “turn to wonder.” Ask yourself, “I wonder what’s behind that action. I wonder what she is thinking when she says that.” And sometimes the right question is, “I wonder why I’m reacting so strongly to this?”

In a way, allowing ourselves—sometimes disciplining ourselves—to *wonder* for a while about things we don’t understand right away is like learning to wait in darkness. One of the reasons we are inclined to jump so quickly to our judgments—“that’s good” or “I don’t like that”—is that it lets us quickly put a new thing into its place in our picture of how the world is supposed to work. It’s like shining a bright light on it, so that the shadows that come with our *not* understanding get erased. *Wonder* is a willingness to wait for light and clarity to come in their own time.

*Wonder* is a word that is used several times in the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus, and particularly the stories of his mother Mary. She watched and listened to the strange things that were happening to her, and she “pondered them in her heart,” which means, I imagine, that she wondered, silently, about why her life didn’t seem more “normal”, and whether what was happening to her was really the way things were supposed to work.

Unlike our Catholic brothers and sisters, we Protestants don’t focus much on Mary. But in the traditions that talk about her more, Mary is honored because of the way she took in God’s shocking news for her life. She’s the model of what it looks like to respond willingly, faithfully, when God comes to suggest that he needs our partnership.

Mary’s story begins with the Angel Gabriel’s visit to her. Like so many stories in the Bible, this one begins with the words “Do not be afraid.” Do you know how many times in the Bible God or an angel says “do not be afraid”? 376. That’s because every time God shows up, it surprises us, and even maybe scares us a little. It’s just not what we expect, in our human lives! And then whatever God, or the angel, says is always a little crazy-sounding, always out of the ordinary, always pushing us to move from where we’ve gotten comfortable and to experience something different from what we thought was normal.

“Greetings, favored one,” the angel began. “Do not be afraid, Mary...but I have something very odd to tell you. You’re going to have a baby...and his name will be Jesus.”

This story is called, in the Christian tradition, the *Annunciation*—the announcement that God would be born into the world. The point of the announcement is really about Jesus, not Mary. This child will be something special, the angel said. He will be called the Son of God. He will

remind you of King David, the wisest and most powerful king who had ever lived, in the history that Mary knew. The kingdom Jesus will reign over is the kingdom of all God's people, and that kingdom will never, ever end, the angel said. (Which was a fantastical statement all by itself, because even King David's reign had ended, long since. No doubt it was an almost ridiculous thought to Mary that her people might live in any kingdom other than the Roman Empire.)

This was a powerful, world-changing announcement. Would Mary have known that at the time? Probably not. Historians who know the culture that Jesus was born into think that Mary was probably not more than 14 or 15 when all of this happened; that's the age at which girls were usually betrothed to be married. There's nothing in the biblical story to suggest that Mary was an extraordinary child, or that she had any reason to ready herself for an exceptional destiny. She's *Saint* Mary now, but no doubt she started out human and imperfect, like every other person. Even Jesus seems to have snapped at her a couple of times when she pushed him in that way only mothers can do.

But the stories suggest something extravagantly peaceful and gracious about her character: the way she took responsibility—but not too much—for her mysterious child; the ways she watched shepherds and wise men come and go, and listened to them with wonder—“pondering all these things in her heart.” Whatever she was like before, it's as if in the moment of the annunciation some new light dawned for her; as if her first “yes” to the angel—“Here I am; let it be with me according to your word”—led her to another and another step in the opening of her heart, and on the road to her becoming someone who carried the presence of God inside of her.

Denise Levertov, who is a poet living now, wrote the poem James read a few minutes ago, a poem in which she reflects on the annunciation story in Luke's Gospel. Her poem too is titled *The Annunciation*. She asks,

*Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?*

Maybe, but how would I recognize an annunciation if it happened to me? Maybe it *has* happened to me, and I've missed it! I wonder sometimes how many people the angel approached *before* Mary—before anyone said “Yes, here I am; I'll do what you ask.”

An annunciation, a call from God—whether to Mary or to any one of us—is always a call to be different. I don't think angels show up to tell us to eat tomato soup instead of a sandwich for lunch today. They come to invite us to change somehow, to participate in something that seems like an extravagant promise, an unrealistic dream, something that rearranges the world—or at least our world. An annunciation calls us to be part of something new, something good, something that needs us so that God can make it happen.

The poet says,

*...we are told of [Mary's] meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage  
The ...Spirit  
did not enter her without consent. God waited.*

*She was free  
to accept or refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.*

I have no doubt that after the angel stopped speaking, there was a moment of silence, an open space in that conversation before Mary answered. “Will you do it?” was the unspoken question that came with the angel’s pronouncement. She was free to accept or to refuse, as we all are, always.

We know Mary’s story because she said yes. But what about all the other things that must have rushed through her mind, or that we might have said—most of them beginning with the words, “yes, but...”?

Yes, but I’m much too young (or old, or busy—you fill in the blank).

Yes, but I’m engaged to someone, and there’s no way to explain this without hurting him terribly. (which is to say, I have people who depend on me, people who expect me not to change)

Yes, but what you propose is so much more complicated than it seems.

Yes, this is a nice idea, but I’m pretty sure it’s impossible.

“Yes, but” is powerful. It often wins. When we say it, it makes us feel prudent and competent and realistic. And “yes, but” can stop an angel cold.

Here’s how the poet says it:

*...often those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
[they] 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.*

We are not powerful enough to stop what the angel comes to bring. God will find a way to make true his extravagant promise of life and love for all, forgiveness we cannot imagine ourselves offering, hope that is big enough to take in this whole earth. But we are free to deny our own place in those promises. We can hold on to our “yes, but’s” until they are all that we see. As the poet says, there will be no punishment for saying ‘no’. It is not God’s way. But “the gate closes, the pathway vanishes.” The moment for our own transformation can pass, if we choose to let it.

Mary said “yes.” No “but.” Just “yes.”

*[She was] 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 astounding ministry she was offered...*

I don't know about you, but I can tell you for sure that I've never seen anything that I would call an angel. I've never heard God's voice in the same way that I can hear your voice, or my own. But there have been plenty of moments when I've had a thought about doing something I've never done before, or had a generous impulse to go out of my way or to give away more than I thought I could afford—and I've let the moment pass. For my own lack of courage, I have known doors to close to “*the astounding ministry I was offered.*” I've done it by my own inaction, or my fear of change, or my very conscientious “yes, but you know, there are a lot of reasons that might not work.”

But I can also point to a few—just a few—moments in my life when I've found the grace to say, maybe a little like Mary, just “yes”. Yes, I will do something that feels scary. Yes, I will let go of something I lean on, trusting that I will not fall. Yes, I will be part of making a world that looks more like what I hope for than what it already is.

I bet you have had moments like that too. These are the moments that change our lives. Our willingness to speak “yes” into the darkness fans that little flame that can bring light and hope—not only to ourselves, but to the whole world. These are the moments when God is born again—the God who is ridiculously unpredictable and extravagant, the God who never leaves well enough alone, the God who will always surprise us and turn us toward wonder. The God who is waiting to be born again—into this world, into us.