

“After Illumination Departs”

December 11, 2022

Rev. Bill Eichhorn

Third Sunday in Advent



The Annunciation

Henry Ossawa Tanner

Readings

Luke 1:38

Mary said, “Behold I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

“A Blessing For After”

Jan Richardson

This blessing
is for the moment
after clarity has come,
after inspiration,
after you have agreed
to what seems impossible.

This blessing
is what follows
after illumination departs
and you realize
there is no map
for the path
you have chosen,
no one to serve
as guide,
nothing to do
but gather up
your gumption
and set out.

This blessing
will go with you.
It carries no answers,
no charts,
no plans.

It carries no source
of light
within itself.

But in its pocket
is tucked a mirror
that from time to time,
it will hold up to you

to remind you
of the radiance
that came
when you gave
your awful and wonderful
yes.

We know her story. Gabriel comes to Mary with news that shocks her, frightens her. God has called her to do the impossible. Awestruck, she asks what we all ask at such a moment – that moment when we are called to do the improbable, the impossible: “How can this be?”

Frederick Buechner imagines that Mary wasn't the only one asking *How can this be?* when he writes:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.

Her answer was the same as many before her: “Let it be to me according to your word.” Abraham and Sarah were called to leave their home and search for a new land, so they went out not knowing where they were going. Moses stood in his bare feet beside the burning bush and said he would go back to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery, but only after he pleaded with God to send his brother Aaron who was far more eloquent. Elijah the Prophet hid in a cave, but that still, small voice found him, and quaking in his boots he said, “Let it be according to your word even if it means going up against powerful Queen Jezebel.”

Like Mary, they all said *yes* to the mission they were given because they believed in a God who made a promise for a better world and who constantly watched over that promise. They said *yes* because they had faith that someday God would deliver on that promise, even if it was not in their day. Mary, like her Jewish forbears, lived by faith, which is the capacity to hold on to God's promise of healthcare for all, quality education for children, dignity for the least, homes for the freezing, food for the starving, a place for the displaced, a homecoming for all God's creatures. No, we don't know how to get there from here. But it is promised; it is sure; it is lived toward.

Mary had this concrete, vivid memory that her people of faith passed on to her, a memory of a God who makes promises and keeps them. A memory of a God who calls on ordinary human beings like you and me, like a sixteen-year-old girl, to do the improbable, the impossible, in order to move us closer to that promised land of peace and justice for all. It is a memory that resonates with the prophetic words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: “I have a dream.” Believing in God's dream, living as if that dream will one day come true, that is what faith is about. It is not about assenting to dogma or doctrine. It is not about obedience to a religious institution. It is about saying *yes* to the ascent up the mountain, to the trek through the dark valleys. It is saying *yes* to the angel that scares the daylight out of us, to the still, small voice that comes to us when we are afraid, to that burning bush when we think we are not up to the task.

It is Mary's faith that carries her over her fears and moves her beyond her doubts. She says *yes* to the awesome mission Gabriel announces because she possesses the passionate memory of her people, the people of God. She believes in and is committed to a God who makes and keeps promises. Remarkable; and even more remarkable when we remember what is going on in Mary's world. The tyranny of Rome was aided by a corrupt Jewish establishment who used their brand of

religious fundamentalism to control the populace and rob the poor to enrich the powerful. Life was hard and dangerous. Most people worried more over their survival and safety than over the impossible-sounding promises of God. But Mary, with no inkling of what her decision would cost her, utters that courageous word of faith, *yes*.

Remember how it was when you said your *yes* to someone or something that you knew was huge? A commitment you made purely on faith? A job. A relationship. Some wild, new adventure that came out of nowhere, or attempting something you'd never done before. Remember that leap of faith you made because you felt you had to, because you felt called? What about us today, as we wait for a birth, for some Advent arrival? How robust is our faith as a congregation? Are we ready for some unexpected call to do the improbable? Do we believe in a God who makes promises, who watches over them, who instills in all people the longing for community, the desire for peace, for Shalom? Are we ready to live our faith in spite of our doubts and fears, our tiredness? In spite of our inclination to settle for comfort, can we be on tip toe, waiting for the angel? Are we ready to let go of the tried and true as a congregation in order to be faithful to God's call to heal what is broken, to advocate for what is just, to live as peacemakers? Do we have the faith to say "Let it be in us according to your word" in order to give birth to a radical new way of being church?

After the *yes*, there comes the time when the magnificence of the angel is gone, when the radiant moment of illumination is over. Faced with that moment, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth for three months and learns she too is pregnant. Elizabeth will give birth to a child who will become John the Baptist. Imagine the joy of these two women, one in middle age, one in her teens, who are both pregnant. Imagine the wonderment! But the wonderment of their reunion comes to an end. The rigors of being a young, pregnant peasant woman in the harsh realities of first century Palestine occupy Mary's days, and then there is working out the relationship with Joseph, the man she will marry. They had to leave Galilee and go to Nazareth in order to be enrolled in a census so the empire could exact taxes from the people. After the wondrous birth, after the shepherds returned to their flocks and the wise ones headed back east, Mary, Joseph and the babe fled to Egypt to avoid the killing rampage of King Herod who was out to murder the newborn Messiah, a foreshadowing of things to come.

This is the time when you need a blessing for after. After the clarity of the angelic moment is past, after the inspiration has dissipated, after you have said *yes* to the impossible, that is when you need something that can transform the stuff of pain, grief, death, fear. When Mary went to Elizabeth with her amazing news, Elizabeth blessed Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb ... and blessed is she who believed [who believed!] that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Blessings, at least the ones that come to us from the Bible, are poetic, lyrical instruments of empowerment.

Jan Richardson, who provides us with a powerful blessing that was our second reading this morning, writes this about blessings:

... a blessing is a channel of the Divine, a profound means of grace that has the capacity to open our eyes so that we might recognize and receive help of the One who created us in love and whose deepest desire for us is that we be whole ...

She goes on:

Although a blessing might not be magical, a good blessing nonetheless shimmers with the mystery that lies at the heart of God. A blessing speaks from God's mysterious heart into our heart, meeting us in our ache for connection and presence. A blessing taps into our longing for what lies beyond our experience and understanding, helping us recognize how mystery makes its home within the familiar contours of our life.

Back to Mary and Elizabeth. With Elizabeth, Mary receives solace and sanctuary. She takes in Elizabeth's blessing that leads her to a powerful connection to the divine. Mary then breaks into song: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior ...". The Magnificat. Through a blessing, God meets Mary in her ache for presence and moves her from fear to faith, from doubt to courage. Mary and Elizabeth show us how a blessing can awaken our imaginations, challenge us to envision a world made new.

The next time, my friends, you say yes to something like an angel or a still, small voice, or a crazy idea, and you find yourself in that weird, unnerving place where the clarity and inspiration have passed, I invite you to remember you have been blessed with a mirror that is always in your pocket to remind you of that magical, awe-filled time when you uttered yes.



Looking in the Mirror
George Tsui