
An Announcement from Our Angels

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A**

It's the last Sunday of Advent, so now we're starting to hear about angels again. Today it's "the angel of Lord" (Mt. 1:20) that appears to Joseph in a dream (Mt. 1:20). Later in Advent it will be the angel Gabriel who announces the birth of Jesus to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lk. 1:26ff). Even later in the story of Christmas it's "a multitude of the heavenly host" announcing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward humanity" (Lk. 2:13-14). Yet, for our good news today I want to add the announcements from angels to *us*. "Announcements from our angels" to us—that's my gospel good news for this final Sunday of Advent this year.

Here's how we can get there. Today's readings reminded me of three poems by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The first poem is about today's gospel reading. When Joseph discovers that his fiancée Mary is already pregnant, before they have lived together, he plans to divorce her discreetly without public disgrace. But then "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' (Mt. 1:20).

Here's how the poet Rilke relates that story. He titles his poem, "Joseph's Suspicion"

And the angel spoke and made an effort with the man, who clenched his fists:
But do you not see by every fold that she is cool as God's early day.

Yet the other looked somberly at him, murmuring only: What has changed her so? But at that the angel cried: Carpenter, do you not yet see that the Lord God is acting?

Because you make boards, in your pride, would you really call him to account who modestly out of the same wood makes leaves sprout and buds swell?

He understood. And as he now raised his eyes very frightened, to the angel, he was gone. He pushed his heavy cap slowly off. Then he sang praise.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, "Joseph's Suspicion," trans. M.D. Herter Norton (adaptation)

So with Joseph let's raise our eyes, and praise God also, who from the same wood that carpenters use to make boards does something beyond our account: who "makes leaves sprout and buds swell."

But now consider the birth event of our Lord from an angelic perspective. The angel Gabriel comes to announce to the Blessed Virgin that she has been chosen to be the "God bearer"—the *Theotokos* which is the Greek word used in the Eastern Orthodox churches. The poem imagines that Gabriel as an angel is so immense, both in the magnitude of its being but also in its consciousness. Its so endowed with galactic and cosmic advantages that it has come to Mary from such a vast spiritual distance; from such a distance that it can barely remember what its message is. It keeps losing the message in the immensity of its awareness of the cosmos.

It's as if finding the one point where the Incarnation is occurring is a trek; like finding a needle in a haystack. It remind me of a woman I encountered once when I was canoeing on the lake at nearby Stone Mountain. As I neared the dock on the shore of the lake she had her fishing rod extended out into the water and called out to me. She asked if I could advise her how best to use the rod in order to retrieve something from the bottom of the lake near the dock. Guess what it was? It was a prize fishing rod that she had lost in the lake earlier. That's

right. She was using a fishing rod trying to find a fishing rod. Well, that's not going to work, is it?

It may remind you of that joke about the person who lost their keys in a parking lot somewhere. They're looking for them under a streetlight that is shining over the parking lot. Someone comes up and learns what is it they're looking for and asks them, "Exactly whereabouts here were you when you lost them?" They answer, "Not here. It was by those bushes over there." "Then why are you looking for them over here?" the person asks. "Because the light is better over here," they answer.

Well, that's not going to work, is it? Now, it may be a stretch of imagination; but suppose that's like Rilke's angel trying to find the singularity of the Incarnation: trying to find Mary as the focus of God's breakthrough into our space and time. In the immensity of its cosmic awareness, where is she? Imagine with me that scenario as this poem describes the Annunciation from an angel's perspective.

You are not nearer to God than we; we all are far from Him.
Wonderfully nonetheless are your hands blessed.
No other woman's ripen so, shimmering out so from the hem: I am the day, I am the dew, but you are the tree.

I am weary now, my way was far; forgive me, I forgot what he, who great in gold adornment sat as in the sun,
would have you know, you musing one, (space has bewildered me).
See: I am what is beginning, but you are the tree.

I spread my wings out and became wonderfully wide:
now your small house overflows with my great dress.
And still you are as alone as never, and scarcely see me;
because I am a breath in the grove, but you are the tree.

The angels all are so full of fear, let go of one another:
never yet has longing been like this, so undefined and great.
Perhaps something will happen soon that you in your dream understand.
Hail to you, my soul beholds you are prepared and ripen.
You are a gateway great and high, and you shall open soon.
You, my song's dearest ear, now I feel: my word was lost in you as in a wood.
So I came and fulfilled for you a thousand and one dreams.
God looked at me: he dazzled . . .
But you are the tree.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, "Annunciation," trans. M.D. Herter Norton (adaptation)

So that's Rilke's poem, "Annunciation." How fitting for our final Sunday of Advent. "So I came," the angel declares, "and fulfilled for you a thousand and one dreams." But precisely here I invite us all to consider how our angels also come to us; and how in us are fulfilled, "a thousand and one dreams." Yes, precisely here, I'd like you to consider the immensity of something that can also happen to each of us. What about announcements to us? As we observe the end of Advent, the coming of the Christ Child that changes all time and history; that great breakthrough. What about the life-changing breakthroughs that also happen to us?

Consider here one last poem by Rilke, this one called "Remembering."

And you wait, are awaiting the one thing
that will infinitely increase your life;
the powerful, the uncommon,
the turning of stones,
depths towards you.

Dimly there gleam in the bookcase
the volumes in gold and brown;
and you think of lands journeyed through,
of pictures . . .

And you know all at once: That was it.
You arise, and before you stands
a bygone year's

anguish and form and prayer.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke, Erinnerung, "Remembering," trans. M.D. Herter Norton (adaptation)

That's how Rilke's poem, "Remembering" ends, and I invite you to remember with me: Yes, those awesome, life-changing occasions when we experienced something 'powerful, uncommon, the turning of stones; depths turned towards us.' Yes, and perhaps something like this has occurred for you more than once. But at least once, I wager, each of us had something occur where 'we knew all at once: that was it!' And we 'arose and stood before a bygone year's anguish and form and prayer.'

So here today, let's treasure those occasions. Either they have not happened for you, or else you're ready for another one to happen again. Either way, consider this Advent time of waiting as your next adventure. What would be you next 'infinite increase of life?' What would reward you for yet another period of 'anguish and form and prayer?' Since the resources of God are without limit and without measure, what new thing can the Almighty do for you—the all loving One bring to birth in your life—as we converge with the marvelous birth celebrated this week?

Either way, may our Collect be fulfilled yet again, as we prayed at the beginning of worship today:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself . . . Amen.

-- Fourth Sunday of Advent, Book of Common Prayer (1979/1990), p. 212.