

Homily for Service of Lessons and Carols

Sweet Hymns of Joy

Michael D. Kirby

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Luke 1:26-38

It is called "the Annunciation"...the day that this messenger of God delivered the oddest divine telegram ever...This peasant child, likely little older than 14 or 15, hears "You are favored of God...and you will be visited by the Spirit of God, and you will bear the child who will be called the Son of God. Oh and by the way, your old and barren kinswoman Elizabeth is expecting too."

It's an old familiar story for most of us...this prelude to Christmas...this event that is celebrated by our Roman Catholic friends as a feast day all the way back on March 25th...appropriately nine months before Christmas. Yet for us protestants, the annunciation is always crammed into the 4th Sunday of Advent...as though we can only talk about Mary and her incredible faith as a part of the Nativity...As John Buchanan has put it, we haul her out of tissue paper once a year, place her in the crèche and then, come January, we wrap her up again in the tissue and store her away until next year. She has done her job and we are done with her.

Our Protestant discomfort with Mary is perhaps one of the areas of greatest disconnect between Protestants and Catholics... Peter Gomes, the late former leader of the Chapel at Harvard, and an American Baptist, gave voice to this traditional discomfort by telling the story of the prominent Protestant theologian who dies and goes to heaven. Jesus comes down from his seat at the right hand of God to greet him "Ah, Professor, what a pleasure.

Welcome to the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. "I know you have met my father, but I don't believe you know my mother."

What are we so afraid of? All this talk of her being a virgin? Discomfort with the visitation of angels? Or perhaps she makes us uncomfortable because she is the only one who is here today on this side of the Nativity who will also be there...on the other side of Good Friday...

Or maybe her faith intimidates us. Mary's yes is one of the most remarkable acts of faith in human history—not just because of the risks she exposes herself to, but because Mary gives up needing to know all of the answers and the reasons and the zillion other hows and whys that Gabriel's announcement must bring to mind...Oh she asks her question for clarification... but she doesn't follow up with a million other questions... She says, "Let it be."

Did you notice that...not let it happen, not, let's get on with it, not so how am I going to pull this off...She says, "Let it be..."

And that I think is something that we have missed in the Annunciation most of the time...that Mary's Yes is the ultimate act of being rather than knowing...

How does she get there? How does she hold on to it through all that will come? Perhaps she remembers the words that close her conversation with God's messenger in this text...Remember how the angel said it? "Nothing will be impossible with God." Not...nothing IS impossible... nothing **will be** impossible. The promise is not just for today...but for all the days...all the challenges...all the moments of apparent hopelessness that are to come.

Our challenge today, I think, in the midst of all of this joyous music, in the midst of this season of hope, peace, joy, and love...is to make it also a season of faith...not so much of believing....but of being...of settling into and trusting the very source of life itself... For Mary, that way of being carries a mother from moments of shame through moments of happiness and consternation that every mother knows, all the way to moments of unspeakable grief...and ultimately to the unspeakable wonder of resurrection.

She hears that NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD...and though everything around her will try to say that this statement simply isn't true...she will continue to trust in her son, to be sure...but also to trust in this promise of God.

One of the great wonders of the incarnation is God's selection of Mary...not that she's a virgin...but that she's a nobody...little more than a child...a peasant nobody among a people who are vassal subjects of a foreign occupier...

And yet she is the one who hears a promise and says yes... ..she, who has nothing, will trust that with God nothing will be impossible...that no situation... no person, no event, no wrong that humans do to one another... is so irredeemable that God cannot transform it...

It's worth noting what happens AFTER today's text. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and finds that Gabriel's story is confirmed...and then, with just one bit of evidence to support the promise on which she has based her life...Mary sings... She sings perhaps the most radical revolutionary, prophetic song in history...She sings of a God who will comfort the afflicted and afflict the

comfortable. She sings in hope...but there is also palpable joy...Mary's response to these incredible demands placed upon her faith is sweet hymns of joy.

In this Advent...may we hear the promise to Mary...that nothing will be impossible...and not flee from her...or from it...Instead, let us walk with her...as we walk with Christ our brother...and like our service today...let our lives be marked by sweet hymns of joy...those days when we live and love fully and boldly, trusting not that we are invincible, but that God is...

May the promise that kept her sane and gave her peace inspire us to a faith that invites us to see the possibilities before us...the illogical possibilities of love and joy...the mysterious possibilities of hope and peace...and with Mary, let us journey with Christ into our unknown tomorrows, singing all the while...Amen.