

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

Advent IV

By Eric Howell

Luke 1:26-38

December 21, 2008

Today's scripture from the gospel of Luke is known as the Annunciation. Annunciation. It's the noun form of the verb, announce. I suppose announcement is also the noun form of announce. But announcement, while a more familiar word to us, just isn't thick enough to carry the weight of what happened. An angel from God out of the blue approaches a young, engaged-to-be-married, Jewish girl with an unbelievable message for her. Announcement sounds like something that squawks over the PA in homeroom. "Lunch today will be a cutlet, tater tots, green beans and milk. Order forms for school pictures are due back tomorrow. Please bring your permission slip for the field trip next week to the Alamo." Those are announcements. They are informing you of something you might want or need to know. We do announcements at the end of worship services. We take a few moments to broadcast events and items of interest in the life of DaySpring. While probably not a matter of life and death, an announcement at the end of a service is important. But it's not an Annunciation.

Annunciation *is* announcement in the sense that it is news. It certainly is that and more. "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you. You will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus." That is quite a lot to take in in one moment, is it not? For an unmarried virgin that certainly is news. It's more than news. It's revelation. It's call. What we are really talking about here is a call. You've been called. How will you respond?

We in the church have too often quarantined the idea of 'call' to refer to just people who feel compelled by a spiritual force to go into ministry. We have done so because we have quarantined 'ministry' to refer to the service of professionals who go to seminary and work full time for the church. But neither ministry nor call should be reserved for a class of Christians. Ministry is the outward response of God's inward work in each of us. What happens deep within overflows in service to our neighbor. Call is the way we describe that sense you get of how God is directing you to live out what is growing deep within. To use theological language: It's how your spiritual life is incarnated. To use Christmas language: It's how Christ within you is birthed into the world.

The call, the annunciation, to Mary came from an angel. I don't know of a whole lot of folks who have seen angels giving them direct messages from God. Most of us probably have wished it would be that straightforward. "God, just give me a sign. Give me a message to know your will." It seems so much easier that way. If an angel would just appear and tell me what God wants, I wouldn't have to make decisions. It seems that way, doesn't it? But that would be an announcement. God's not in the business of announcements. God is in the business of annunciations.

The angel appears to young Mary. "Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you." Mary's response seems so human and so honest. She was greatly troubled by the saying

and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. “What kind of news is this?” Not an idle question.

Unless you read this week’s issue of *Sport’s Illustrated* or you are a fan of Aberdeen, South Dakota’s Division II Northern State men’s basketball, you probably have not heard of Coach Don Meyer. You’ve probably heard of Dean Smith and Bobby Knight. But not Don Meyer, even though Meyer’s teams have won twenty-one more games than those of University of North Carolina’s Coach Smith (898-879), and he is only four wins behind Knight for most wins ever for men’s collegiate basketball. In thirty-six years of coaching, only one player does not have a college degree. Obviously, Meyer is a talented coach who, for whatever reason, didn’t make it to the big time.

Not only has coach Meyer been able to lead his teams to victory after victory, but he has had the time and ability to develop a network of youth basketball camps that attract some of the biggest names in the country. He personally attends the camps and personally invests himself in his players. On September 5, 2008, he even led a caravan of cars to a hunting lodge for a team retreat, the kind of thing that Coach does to invest a sense of family in his teams.

Along the way to that retreat, Meyer’s car veered into oncoming traffic where it was struck violently by a semi. His players, following behind him, rushed to his damaged car. He was still alive, but badly injured. They summoned the poise that Meyer had cultivated within them. One called 911, some formed a prayer circle around him, and the team captain grabbed his coach’s hand and repeated the slogans of the practice court: “We’ve gotta be tough, Coach! It’s the fourth quarter! Narrow focus. NBA! Next best action.” “They saved my life,” said Meyer, who was airlifted to a hospital after a thirty-minute wait. He was alive, but badly injured. Ribs were crushed and one leg had to be amputated.

If the wreck hadn’t happened, if the doctors hadn’t performed emergency surgery to remove his spleen and reattach his diaphragm, they wouldn’t have discovered the cancer burrowing into his liver and small intestine until it was too late. Coach Meyer said: “It is now 10 a.m. on Friday, September 12. My trauma surgeon, David Strand, just told me they found carcinoid cancer in my liver and small bowels. The cancer was discovered during the emergency surgery after my wreck on September 5. What’s great about this is I would not have known about the cancer had I not had the wreck. God has blessed me with the one thing we all need, which is truth. I can now fight with all of my ability. What I now ask is that everybody who believes in God would praise him for this discovery and pray to Him to give me the strength, patience and peace to be a man of God on this journey. I am looking forward to coaching this season and am forever thankful to my team who saved my life and the coaching staff who has stepped up to the plate.” Meyer is back on the sidelines and in the next few weeks will break the record for most men’s basketball wins.

“You have found favor with God. The Lord is with you.” Don Meyer believes this. Translation: “You are loved by God in a special way and God has a purpose for you.” Sounds like great news. That’s news that not only our ears, but our hearts long to have spoken to us. You are loved and God has a purpose for you. *You are loved and God has a purpose for you.*

Why would Mary wonder what sort of news this might be? Maybe she considered her circumstances. She was engaged, but unmarried. To have a baby would cause all sorts of problems on all sorts of levels....

Maybe she knew her history. God has this way of coming to people out of the blue and really messing up their lives.

“Noah.” “Yes?” “Build an ark.” “What’s an ark?”

“Abram.” “Yes?” “Leave your home.” “Where will I go?”

“Moses.” “Yes?” “Go tell Pharaoh to free my people.” “What will I say?”

“Isaiah. Amos. Jeremiah. Micah.” “Yes?” “Be my prophets and speak hard truth to high power.” “How will we survive?”

“John.” “Yes?” “Go in the wilderness and prepare the way of the Lord.” “Will they listen?”

“Mary.” “Yes?” “Become the theotokos, the mother of God.”

Over and over God uses people, calls people to live extraordinary lives. So if you ever get the overwhelming sense that God loves you, enjoy that feeling. You were created to experience God’s love. That’s why you are here. So enjoy it. And watch out! God’s got big plans for you.

One of the fun parts about going to seminary is being around people who have a story to tell of ‘call’. Some have stories of being woken in the middle of the night by an overwhelming sense of God’s direction in their lives. For others it’s a less-dramatic process of discernment, prayer, and surrender. For still others, they are searching and feel like seminary was not the result of a call, but part of a process that is still in motion.

But even more fun is to be around regular people who aren’t in seminary who don’t trade as often in the language of call. Occasionally, you hear a great story. Just this week, I met a college student on the day of her December graduation. She was flying across the country back home for Christmas. She is trying to decide whether to move back home or stay in her college town and work on a ministry to homeless people that she and some others have started.

I know a homebuilder whose vocation is to build custom homes for his clients. In the process he develops a relationship with them, designs and builds the home working with his client. He leads a 5:30 a.m. Bible Study on Thursday mornings with his employees. And when the home is totally completed and if he feels like it would be appropriate, he joins with the family and says a prayer of blessing over their home. One of his clients didn’t know a soul in her new hometown, but was ready to build a home. I asked her later when her house was almost done how she knew to find our mutual friend. She said she Googled these words “Homebuilder. Quality. Integrity.” And his name was first on the list.

I know a financial planner who was advising his clients in the boom a few years ago to take a steady, responsible approach to building wealth. To stay out of debt, invest

regularly in a quality fund. And resist the temptation to go for a quick, big financial score. He would quote proverbs about building wealth faithfully and responsibly. He talks about tithing and charitable giving. He probably lost some clients who weren't patient with his disciplined approach, but he looks like a genius now. Even more, even though the market has changed, he hasn't changed.

Lawyers. Doctors. Teachers. Engineers. Politicians. Trash Collectors. People in every walk of life are listening to God's message for their lives. Their call. It doesn't always make life easy to know God's call. But it makes life God's. Every time God calls someone, that person arrives at the intersection of what good may come and what risk is required.

Noah built an ark and saved a remnant of humankind.

Abraham left home and became the father of many nations.

Moses got up his courage and confronted Pharaoh and set God's people free.

The prophets risked everything to speak God's message of justice and righteousness to the nation.

Mary, perhaps the most unlikely of them all, receives all this news and says, "Let it be to me according to your will." Later, someone will write a hymn about Christ that Paul will quote in Philippians 2. In it, he writes, "At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth." Mary's knee was the first to bow as she courageously and obediently accepted her call to bear a son and name him Jesus.

For anyone who understands what it means to be called by God, to hear God calling your name is terrifying. In our own time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded that when Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die. The angels were always telling people not to be afraid. And no wonder. When God calls you, God is going to do something good, but it's going to come only through your obedience in the face of challenge.

The annunciation is one part 'God loves you' and one part 'God has something for you.' It's a promise and a challenge that something is being born in you. Something is stirring within you. Don't be afraid, the messenger says. It's always a little scary when God starts working on and in you. I think that's part of what it means to be human. What it means to be human to is to be loved by God, to listen for God's calling voice within. Today we join with our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters in the hymn of the Annunciation. It's a song for everyone like Mary who listens for God's voice, bends the knee and faces whatever challenges come with faith and courage, saying, let it be to me according to your will.

Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the eternal mystery! The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin. As Gabriel announces the coming of Grace, together with him let us cry to the Theotokos: "Rejoice, O Full of Grace, The Lord is with you!"

Copyright, Eric Howell, 2008