

I've been thinking about images of the angel Gabriel all week, of pictures I've seen or images that just come to mind. I think of the children gathering next Saturday night to lead us in Christmas Eve worship, and the beautiful white gown that one of them will wear, as she stands on the chancel steps, and raises her arm as Mary kneels to receive the news that she will give birth to the Son of God.

I think of the masks I ordered from Oriental Trading that our high schoolers used a few Sunday evenings ago as they led worship with the Confirmation students. They retold the whole Christmas story in their own words and one wore, or held the mask of the angel Gabriel, a pale face surrounded by blond wavy hair and a shiny headband complete with a glittering star.

We might think of El Greco's painting where Gabriel is floating on a cloud with outstretched arm as a gathering of other angels in light appear overhead. Or the Di Vinci set in a garden where the angel in flowing red skirt kneels with a hand of blessing in front of a seated Mary.

Angels in scripture aren't always this pretty. I mean, there's a reason why Zechariah, why Mary, why Daniel tremble in fear when Gabriel shows up.

These messengers of God were scary. Their presence was intimidating to behold. Think burning bush. Think Hagar, you're going to have to go back to Sarah and Abraham. Think Balaam seeing an angel with sword drawn in hand (Numbers 22.31). Think Manoah and his wife (Samson's parents) in the book of Judges looking on as "the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar" (13.20). We think of the seraphim (literally, the burning ones) and cherubim with four faces and four wings, large creatures, part of God's heavenly host, which in Hebrew is more like the "heavenly armies."

After Daniel's encounter with Gabriel, he is "overcome and lay sick for some days" (8.27). The women's choir will sing about Gabriel as one who came, "his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame." Our lives of faith aren't all pretty dresses and shiny headbands, and neither are all of the beings in our scriptures.

I've also been thinking about images of Mary all week, thinking about the presentation Ms. Sprecher gave to the fifth and sixth grade students about the Madonna and Child, creating my own art late at night with glue stick and magazine strips. Mary is usually wearing blue, sometimes with child at breast, with crown or halo. Drawing from what we hear in hymns, Mary is seen as this calm, still, meek, mild woman, this woman who responded to God's call.

When I think of the details of this story though, it isn't all peace and assurance, joy and gently ringing bells from a distance. Mary was a young teen, engaged to Joseph, told that she would be pregnant. This is serious stuff, having to go tell the man she was promised to that she was with child in a society that would most definitely not embrace her in her condition, but could and probably would cast her out or stone her.

And, yet this is how God comes. In all of our Advent waiting, we finally hear of a definite arrival in the annunciation. This is where God shows up in our gospel text this morning, with scary angel and a young woman in a compromised situation. Our God isn't a God of all sunshine and giggles. No, from our seats with limited view as though behind a beam in the stadium or ballpark, sometimes God is a God of changed plans, unexpected turns in the journey, moments of uncertainty.

I wonder what images, what moments in your life may have felt like these. And maybe not exactly at that moment, but reflecting back you can see and sense God's hand, God's wonder and Spirit as this young woman did so long ago.

In one of his sermons on the annunciation, this event when Gabriel comes to Mary and announces the coming of Christ, Luther identified three miracles. First, that a virgin would become a mother; second, that God and humanity would be joined in this child. But Luther said that the most amazing of all was that Mary believed the announcement that she had been chosen to be the mother of God.

Nazareth was an unimportant village in Galilee. Mary was from a non-royal, not powerful family. And yet, her child, the Son of the Most High would receive the throne of his ancestor David. "Nothing will be impossible with God," Gabriel reminds the young woman with words reminiscent of the God's question to Abraham and Sarah, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Genesis 18.14).

It makes sense that Mary asks the angel how this could be. She wasn't anybody special in the grand scheme of things. And God chose her.

Just as the Spirit will come upon Mary,
so the Spirit descends upon the church at Pentecost,
and upon us in baptism.

Just as Mary is the recipient of God's favor, God's grace,
so are we as we look to this narrative continued:

The little child grows,
heals and preaches and teaches and loves,
calls and challenges and heads to the cross,
traveling into, through death and all darkness,
raised and ascended and will come again.

Mary's response here in the gospel, so grounded in humility is quite simple:
Here I am, the servant of the Lord.
Let it be with me according to your word.

The Spirit descends, Mary is recipient of God's grace,
and she becomes the first to carry Jesus in the world.

Mary, like the church, like you and me, are recipients of God's grace in Jesus, and are called to carry Christ into our communities and homes and workplaces and classrooms and lines at the stores.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent,
with visions of angels and servants of God, with hope for the coming of Christ, with memories and moments that weigh heavily or rest gently on our hearts, the Christ-child comes.

Let it be with me according to your word, we might reply as bread and wine are received.
Let it be with me, as we sing and pray and share peace with one another.
Let it be with me, as we go forth into this week,
rounding the bend into our celebration of the nativity.

Servants of the Lord, like Mary, let it be with us,
Not of royal lineage and with less power than perhaps we'd like sometimes,
We can carry Christ like Mary and the church before us.
Let it be with me, with you, with all children of God.

To the glory of God.

