

**Annunciations—Luke 1: 26-38**  
(December 10, 2017—2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent)

*This story was read along with the scripture prior to the reflection:*

*For the last ten years of his life, Tim's father had Alzheimer's disease. Despite the devoted care of Tim's mother, he had slowly deteriorated until he had become a sort of walking vegetable. He was unable to speak and was fed, clothed, and cared for as if he were a very young child. As Tim and his brother grew older, they would stay with their father for brief periods of time while their mother took care of the needs of the household.*

*One Sunday, while she was out doing the shopping, the boys, then fifteen and seventeen, watched football as their father sat nearby in a chair. Suddenly, he slumped forward and fell to the floor. Both sons realized immediately that something was terribly wrong. His color was gray and his breath uneven and rasping. Frightened, Tim's older brother told him to call 911. Before he could respond, a voice he had not heard in ten years, a voice he could barely remember, interrupted. "Don't call 911, son. Tell your mother that I love her. Tell her that I am all right." And Tim's father died.*

*Years later, Tim, a cardiologist, looked around the room at the group of doctors mesmerized by this story. "Because he died unexpectedly at home, the law required that we have an autopsy," he said. "My father's brain was almost entirely destroyed by this disease. For many years, I have asked myself, 'Who spoke?' I have never found even the slightest help from any medical textbook. I am no closer to knowing this now than I was then, but carrying this question with me reminds me of something important, something I do not want to forget. Much of life can never be explained but only witnessed."*

*Adapted-Rachel Naomi Remen, The Question, Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal, Riverhead Books, New York, pp. 300-301*

Did you like that last line in the story, "...Much of life can never be explained but only witnessed." Does it resonate with your life? Have you had experiences that elude explanation, times to which you can only witness? Those words strike me as very wise. They also strike me as a very helpful way to receive scripture. The notion of witnessing instead of explaining helps us to combine the intellect with intuition, the rational with the mysterious.

On this, I stand with the likes of retired American Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong who says unequivocally that the scripture we heard today is not literally true.<sup>1</sup> But, I also stand with Spong when he says that the stories of scripture are ways of witnessing to the reality of God in people's lives. Our scripture today is one of the many ways in which the people of the New Testament witness to their experience that in Jesus they encountered something of God, something beyond human creation. Our story today is a way of saying that Jesus' presence in their lives was an act of God,<sup>2</sup> an act of sacred creation in the lives of humans.

So, you see we can use our intellect to analyze the historical realities and that's important, but it's not enough. In order for scripture to speak to us in our time and place we also need awe. We need awe to appreciate how much in life is pure gift and grace, to appreciate how much we don't know. We need awe so we don't miss or deprive our lives of those things that aren't easily explainable or that defy explanation. We need awe in order to witness to the reality of God in our lives.

Having said all that, I don't think it matters what you believe about this scripture, whether you take it literally or not, that's not what's important. I am both awed and repelled by the faith of all kinds of Christians. I've noticed the common denominator in the lives of Christians I respect seems to be, they are not fixated on belief as the core of their faith, they are more concerned with what the Christian story says about living in our time and place. Regardless of how we approach the bible, the questions with which this story confronts us are: what are the annunciations in our lives? How are we called to give birth to God in our world? When have we been called to use our gifts and our lives to give birth to the divine?

Sometimes annunciations come as blinding flashes of realization, taking on biblical qualities. I have a very sane and rational colleague who had an experience where in the middle of a regional church meeting a vision of Jesus appeared to him waving him forward to the front of the church and saying, "follow me." Sometimes annunciations are little annoying prods that won't leave us alone, prods of conscience, discomfort with a situation or dissatisfaction with our lives. I noticed that a few years ago with the "Idle No More" actions throughout the country and more recently the Syrian refugee crisis, where people who had never before engaged in activism or social action of any kind

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<sup>1</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism*, Harper San Francisco, 1991, pp. 215-216.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Harpur, *The Christmas Myth is the Story of the Human Family*,  
[http://www.tpc.org/library/article.cfm?library\\_id=894](http://www.tpc.org/library/article.cfm?library_id=894)

took a risk and got involved because their souls and consciences had been prodded and bothered and they felt called to respond like never before. As a result, new possibilities for right and just relationships emerged. Sometimes annunciations are as simple as the thought of someone coming into your mind, calling them, and finding out that it was the perfect time for that call. Annunciations sometimes are recurrent themes in our lives that keep popping up. I know someone who recently went back to school to become an Early Childhood Educator after bouncing around from office job to office job for years. It dawned on her over a period of time that the pattern in her life was one of joy around children. Here is one you might not have considered, perhaps the declining state of the mainline church is an annunciation, a call to give birth to God in our community in a new way.

So how do we know if an annunciation is real? How do we know if those more subtle attempts to get our attention are actually angels with annunciations? First, my experience has been that annunciations always involve detours from our agendas. Annunciations are never convenient. Annunciations come into our neat, ordered, tightly arranged and predictable lives and mess everything up.<sup>3</sup> So annunciations involve a certain amount of letting go of what we thought was important and an opening up to something new. Second, annunciations are always invitations to experience wholeness in our lives. Wholeness is one of those things that is easier to witness to than to explain. But, here is an attempt; wholeness is the bringing together of the disparate and fragmented parts of our lives or our world into one. We are more whole when we live with integrity, acting from our conscience and using our gifts and passions in service to others. Our world becomes more whole when justice and respect are hallmarks of the relationships between cultures and religions. We become more whole when we connect in meaningful ways with the essence of who we are and with other people. Annunciations are invitations to wholeness, because whatever else we mean by God we mean unity. Again, something best witnessed to than explained. God is like a choir of voices, sopranos, altos and bases in perfect harmony to create something beautiful. God is like an eco-system of water, forest and rock that work together to nurture and sustain life. God is like a dance, each dancer working in sync with each other to create something that is seamless and unified. Annunciations call us to play our unique part, call us to participate in God's work of drawing all creation together into relationship.

On this second Sunday in Advent, it is important to note that one of the tangible results of responding to annunciations is peace. Don't confuse this with comfort, because I've already pointed out how disruptive annunciations can be. I'm speaking of a different kind of peace that wants to be birthed in our lives and our world. I'm speaking of the peace that comes from knowing that life is not all up to you, that all you are called to do is to play your part with the gifts and the time you have been given. It is to know that you are not the song, but one of the singers, that you are not the whole ecosystem but a tree or a drop of water, that you are not the dance but one of the dancers. The peace of responding to annunciations is to know yourself to be part of a larger whole and to find

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p.20.

rest in that knowledge. That 'peace' is one of the promises on our Advent journey. So, we'll keep going, with awe and wonder, witnessing to the reality of God in our midst.