

Houses for God

Homily for 4th Advent, December 24, 2017
St. Peter's, Glenside

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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

We know this story so well. We've heard it many times at this season of the year. A young woman startled by an angel. And, of course, we've seen it in many versions, especially on the cards we received this month. Contemporary poet Luci Shaw speculates about the 15th century monk and painter Fra Angelico, speculating with his colors and brushes.

The Annunciatory Angel (detail of Fra Angelico's "The Annunciation")

The androgynous visitor is dressed in a rosy fabric thick as pigment, the tunic blown back by turbulence to expose its lining, a blue crescent under the right arm. Angels are said to be genderless, so there's a certain enigma here. A wing, the clue to otherness, arcs in golden space. . . .

More. . .

How might it feel (if an archangel has feelings) to bear this news? Perhaps as confounded as the girl, there in the corner? We worry that she might faint. Weep. Turn away, perplexed and fearful about opening herself. Refuse to let the wind fill her, to buffet its nine-month seed into her earth. She is so small and intact. Turmoil will wrench her.

She might say no.

The End of the Story

The Bible is a long, complicated narrative, beginning with Adam and Eve and winding through the generations of Abraham and his family. Hearing Mary's story is like getting to the chapter that you knew had to come in a long and sprawling novel; the one that would pull together all the



Annunciation (Cortona), Fra Angelico, 1533

earlier hints and move the story to its climax. In a mystery, it would be the chapter in which the murderer is finally revealed, much to your surprise. As our reading from Romans describes the Gospel, it is “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed.”

In fact, there are many of the earlier clues in what the angel told Mary. Luke’s telling rings with echoes of the births of Isaac to Sarah, of Gideon and Samson, of Samuel, all announced ahead of time by God, an angel, or a priest; and prophecies of a coming king who would reign over the whole earth, forever, like the promise God made to David, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”

But first, there’s Mary’s situation, as pondered by Shaw (*Mary Considers Her Situation*):

What next, she wonders,
with the angel disappearing, and her room
suddenly gone dark.

The loneliness of her news
possesses her. She ponders
how to tell her mother.

Still, the secret at her heart burns like
a sun rising. How to hold it in—
that which cannot be contained.

She nestles into herself, half-convinced
it was some kind of good dream,
she its visionary.

But then, part dazzled, part prescient—
she hugs her body, a pod with a seed
that will split her.

What next, indeed.

David would also wonder, “What next?” as Nathan disappeared. David had his plan to make a house for God and was turned down with a counter offer of a house for himself. Not what a king in his day would expect. When you were successful in battle, you built a house, a temple, in gratitude to your god. David is in a quandary. His assumptions have been upended. What will other kings think?

God has insisted that he will be the patron in this relationship, not David. Nathan’s message from God sweeps away David’s self esteem, his image of his role in the world. This is about more than real estate and a building program. David is confronted with the truth that God rules and David is merely a vassal/puppet king.

Two messengers, two disturbing messages; altering the plans of a young woman and a great king.

Houses

There are several houses in what we heard today. Two, in fact, in 2 Samuel: David's plan to build a house for God and God's promise to make a house for David. And then, Joseph, who will shelter Jesus in his home, is from David's house. Even Mary becomes a kind of house, a place for Jesus. Luci Shaw imagines the coming of Jesus into Mary this way:

Made flesh

After
the white-hot bright beam of annunciation
Fused heaven with dark earth
His searing sharply-focused light
Went out for a while
Eclipsed in amniotic gloom:
His cool immensity of splendor
His universal grace
Small-folded in a warm dim
Female space—
The Word stern-sentenced to be
nine months dumb—
Infinity walled in a womb. . .

Holy Violence

There's a certain holy violence in this story. We shy away from violence, especially in this time and season. We want relief from the news stories decorated with crime scene tape and flashing lights. Or the latest tweet storm. Or another embarrassed resignation by a public figure we thought we trusted. In the middle of all this chaos, the evening news has tried to show us people caring for one another. But, these stories don't change the other news.

In Luke, a fearsome messenger comes with troubling news. How will Mary tell her mother? Or Joseph? What will he do?

part dazzled, part prescient—
she hugs her body, a pod with a seed
that will split her.

Later, Mary will hear about a sword that will pierce her and finally stand by as her son, that nine-month seed, is crucified. That is what's next. *She is so small and intact. Turmoil will wrench her.*

Christmas cards and carols present a softer, more cuddly picture of Mary gazing and Joseph hovering in the soft glow of a stable. And, there is that side to the story. But the readings this morning direct our attention to the arrival of God's kingdom and the conflict that followed. The angel promised Mary that "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." When that appears on the evening news in Rome, Caesar Augustus will be threatened. When King Herod hears about it, there will be slaughter. And, eventually, the Jewish leaders will engineer a

crucifixion. Mary harbors a threat to the established order. The world will not abide two kingdoms.

In Mary's story, we've arrived at the moment promised to David, the time for God's "throne to be established forever." This is serious political news. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, the capital of the empire, "The prophetic writings [will be] made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith."

Mystery Revealed

Last of all, there are the five, perhaps more, house churches in Rome, houses for God, where the crucified and risen Lord Jesus came to meet his people around the Word and Meal; just as he comes to this house each week to meet us, speak to us, hear our prayers, and feed us. All through his letter to the Romans, Paul has been telling them that they serve the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Roman emperors were hailed as "Son of the gods" and "Lord." So when Paul begins his letter giving these titles to Jesus (Romans 1:4, 7), he throws down the gauntlet. The rest of the letter simply explains what this means for these house gatherings of Jews and Gentiles, of slaves, foreigners, shop keepers, and servants in the Caesar's household; and for the city of Rome and for the rest of the world.

And, for us in Glenside in the 21st century. Consider the simple liturgy that we're celebrating this morning. It may not look like much compared to the glittering liturgy of Willow Grove Mall, reminiscent in a startling way of the medieval cathedrals—vast open, arching spaces with smaller side rooms like the twenty plus side chapels at Canterbury Cathedral. Each little chapel/store has its group of clerks who seem like acolytes waiting to show you the salvation of buying stuff. Eventually you are gathered around the altar (cash register) where you tender your credit card and receive in turn your merchandise. You're not quite sure whether you've been cleansed of your anxieties and emptiness, because those feelings will come back as soon as you glance into the next side chapel/store.

The story enacted here this morning is quite different. We've heard that the baby who came through Mary is the heir of David, that "the Lord God [gave] to him the throne of his ancestor David." The meal that we will share will show us that this throne was ascended through suffering not sales; through crucifixion not cash. The turmoil that wrenched Mary yielded "[A] house and . . . kingdom [that has been] made sure forever before [God]; [Jesus'] throne [is] established forever." The crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. As Paul reminded the Roman Christians, we serve the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our liturgy this morning subverts the liturgy of the mall, or of the political process, indeed all the world's liturgies of money, sex, and power. Through Word, Sacrament, and Prayer, God strengthens us and brings about "the obedience of faith to the only wise God."

So, we come to the end of the story that began in a garden. A garden where it all might have ended. But the story went on when God promised to send a seed that would set things right again. These houses are one way to tell the story. Houses for God, where he chooses to dwell and invites us to dwell there with him. For, ultimately, Jesus is the house—the new temple—the

appointed place where the people of God are planted—as Nathan promised David, “so that they might live in their own place, and be disturbed no more, and evildoers shall afflict them no more.”

And where God is blessed, as Paul wrote to the Romans:

Romans 16:25 Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

The poems by Luci Shaw can be found in *Accompanied by Angels* (Eerdmans, 2006), *The Christian Century*, March 21, 2012, and at www.lucishaw.com/poetry. Used by permission of the author.

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