



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The un-tied saddle oxford shoes of a young school-aged Mary are just one of many aspects that show how the artist John Collier's painting of the Annunciation is different than the more customary depictions of this morning's Gospel text. It is one of my favorite illustrations of this moment because while it includes a lot of traditional symbols of the Annunciation (Mary in blue, white lilies, Gabriel and Mary facing each other, a dove representing the Holy Spirit in the background), it is set in the 20th century. Mary's blue is in her school uniform. She is young, and her expression is that of confidence and confusion, fear and wonder. The best thing about this painting is that it shakes the viewer out of the familiar and causes him or her to see this powerful moment with fresh eyes, to see it in a different way.

When things are familiar and time is short (for instance when Advent 4 happens to fall on Christmas Eve morning), we can be tempted to rush. "Christmas is so close so let's get this Advent 4 stuff over with." We know the story, we can go on autopilot and see it like we always have. Humble, lowly, Mary obediently saying yes to the Lord. Then going to see her cousin and singing the song of praise, the Magnificat.

Before we get to the manger and Christ child. Before we rush to hear about shepherds and stars. Before we get wrapped up in presents and traditions. Trees and stockings. Let's pause, breath and wait just one more time. Just one more little pause. Pause just enough to see this familiar story of the Annunciation with fresh eyes. And while the painter causes us to reexamine this moment by bringing Mary into the 21st century, we can do the same by remembering she lived in the first century.

By any stretch telling a poor, young, unmarried girl, in this time period, that they are going to have a baby is not good news. Mary is not envisioning baby showers, and big creative gender reveal announcements in the near future. Social stigma, stoning, and even death are closer to the things crossing her mind. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" This reaction is not merely the passing musings about different possible means of divine conception but an all too familiar reaction to life-changing news. "How can this be, the tests should have come back negative?" "How can this be, I just had lunch with him last week?" "How can this be?" And these moments are not always bad news, but they are always important news. "How can this be, there were so many other applicants for the job?" "How can this be, the doctor said the outlook did not look good?" . . . "How can this be . . . my life is going to be so different now?"

Notice the differences between Mary's response to Gabriel, immediately after she got the news, and to Elizabeth just a short road trip later. We go from "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." to My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior; for he has looked with

favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed; the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him . . . He has shown the strength of his arm, he scatters the proud, casts down the mighty, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away. He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he remembered his promise of mercy. (Apparently, road trips were just as good a time to do some real thinking back then as they are now.) Mary processed this life-changing event and has something to say. She has seen how God is incarnate in this world and helps others to see the world in this different way.

You see, God is particularly present in these “How can this be?” moments of our lives. The good moments and the bad. That is to say, God is present in this messy and confusing world. That is the miracle of the Incarnation. God does not come to some idealized concept of this world. God is not only with us in the easy times, but the hard and perplexing times as well. Each of these moments is an opportunity to reveal God’s kingdom to this world. We, like Mary, can be perplexed and confounded when they first happen to us. These moments, test us, change us, they are the start of a journey or at least a new milestone where that journey significantly changes. We, like Mary, can after a while process it, we can remember God, we can remember how God, is shown through us. We can magnify God. I have always been fascinated by microscopes. The fact that there is this whole other world all around us and all that is needed to see it is a different way of viewing. Mary is calling us to help show forth God’s world that is incarnate in this world. That while at times the powers of this world seem to be in charge, that during those “how can this be?” moments it can seem that only the mighty

are lifted up, only the rich are filled. In those moments. The moments that shape our lives, we can respond in such a way that the shape looks a little bit nearer to God's kingdom.

In our daily Evening Prayer service, only two canticles are suggested, while Morning Prayer has several different offerings that change with days and seasons, Evening Prayer suggests the same two each night. The song of Mary, The Magnificat and the Song of Simeon, the Nunc dimittis, Both hymns of praise that bookend the birth of Jesus. Each and every day we are reminded of these responses to God. In the daily Evening Prayer service of reflection and examination, of remembering the things we have done and left undone, a service of respite from this messy world, full of life-changing moments, it is important that we remember. We remember that two thousand years ago, an angel came to a young girl with news that would change not only her life but the life of the entire world. That she was perplexed and asked, "how can this be?" Each evening we remember that she remembered God, she remembered that God lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, remembers the promise of mercy. Each evening we see God magnified in her, and we remember that we can do the same.