

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 24, 2017**

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

One of the real joys of being in the pastor's office during Advent is seeing the kids get excited for Christmas. Last week, Anthony Rizzo led the annual trip with the confirmation kids to the Rockefeller Christmas Tree in New York City. And maybe it's the combination of a week off school, the excitement of a present under the tree, or the sugar from all the cookies, but they were just about bouncing off the walls. Christmas can't come soon enough. They can't wait to get to Christmas.

Normally the adults are a little more circumspect. A little more content to wait for Christmas to come to them. But not this year. Apparently the secret to getting adults to talk about Christmas not coming soon enough isn't egg nog or presents or Christmas music. It's putting the Fourth Sunday of Advent on Christmas Eve.

While most of the culture around us is plunging headfirst into Christmas celebrations, and because time is so short, our sanctuary is already in Christmas regalia, we are still celebrating the fourth Sunday of Advent. Right on the verge of something big that's about to happen. It's so close you want to say, let's just get to it already. But jump straight to Christmas and you miss one of the most beautiful images of the gospel that we have: the story of Mary's annunciation.

In the Lutheran tradition, we have something of a complicated relationship with Mary. Luther had a fairly nuanced view of Mary. He didn't think people should pray *to* Mary, but that Mary was an important witness to Jesus. Luther even suggested that people who used the daily offices should sing Mary's Magnificat at evening prayer daily as a way to give honor and thanks to God. As time went by, many Lutherans decided that the safest way to make sure they didn't talk about her the wrong way was to just not talk about her at all. And so Mary became and still is a four-letter word in many of our Lutheran churches. Which is unfortunate. Because Mary gives us such vivid imagery and language to talk about grace and vocation. Like many women in the history of the church, we have spent far more time arguing about her than listening to her.

Luther once referred to Mary as the archetype, the highest example, of *solia gratia*, by grace alone. Because Mary was someone with no status. If you were to come up with a ranking of who are the most powerful people in her society, Mary would be just about at the bottom of it. A poor young woman waiting to be married to a tradesman. She is by no reasonable standard, blessed. In fact, she is someone who has definitely not been blessed.

And yet when the angel Gabriel appears, the first thing he says is that she has found favor with God. When everything around her points to the contrary. Like Gabriel must have the wrong house or something. And you wonder what face Mary must have been making, because before she can say anything, Gabriel is already talking again. "Do not be afraid, Mary. For you have found favor with God." Mary has found favor with God for no particular reason. The reason Mary has found favor with God is that God has chosen her. God hasn't chosen her because she's blessed. She isn't full of influence. She isn't full of power. She's full of grace.

And after Gabriel explains what's going to happen, how Mary will conceive and bear a son and call him Jesus, Mary responds with a simple question, "How?" This doesn't make any sense. There are too many barriers. I don't see any way for this to go forward. Which is how most people respond when God interrupts our lives. It's how Moses responds. It's how Samuel responds. It's how Isaiah responds. It's how Paul responds. We look at the barriers in the world and see God's plan for transformation as impossible.

777 Wyckoff Avenue Wyckoff, NJ 07481  
adventlutheranwyckoff.org • (201) 891-1031

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

And yet even after Gabriel offers an explanation of how this is going to happen, an explanation which would seem to raise even more questions for Mary (What is this being overshadowed business about? Why is Elizabeth involved?), Mary responds with those famous words of affirmation. “Here I am, servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your will.”

The story seems to move too quickly. Blink and you miss it. And so, no surprise, we try to clean this story up a lot. One way we’ve done that is by imagining Mary as some meek, thoughtless woman. And so many Christians have assumed, wrongly, that Mary doesn’t have any hopes or dreams for her own life. That she is just an empty vessel waiting to be filled with whatever plans God has for her. That her question “How can this be?” doesn’t show any doubt or skepticism on her part, that it’s just a rhetorical question meant to move the dialogue along. Not only does that reading project a lot of our (and by our, I mean men’s) own biases onto the text. It also doesn’t line up with the rest of the gospels at all. The Mary presented in the gospels is not some glassy-eyed woman who watches the world float by. After giving birth, Mary lives through the flight to Egypt, losing her child, her own reticence about Jesus’s public ministry, her agony under the cross, and, what no mother should ever have to experience, holding her own dead child. Mary is not a woman to be written off as a naïve schoolgirl or some mindless pawn in a cosmic game of salvation. She’s critical, questioning, courageous, and, most important, Jesus’s first disciple.

One of the other ways that people have read this text is by focusing on the move from “How can this be?” to “Let it be with me,” a move that happens in just a few short verses. They turn this into a story about transformation. That Mary had doubts, but she got over her doubts and affirmed God’s plan for her life. This is a better reading of the story, it gives Mary some agency back, but it also puts too neat of a bow on the story. As if Mary’s doubts could be erased so quickly.

It seems more likely that this is a story not about transformation as much as it is openness. What makes Mary, to use Luther’s language, an archetype of a grace-filled life, is not that she has some perfectly formed faith. It’s that her own doubts and skepticism doesn’t stop her from affirming God’s grace in her life. That Mary’s “I don’t understand how” and “Let it be with me” can both be true at the same time. There is a tension between those two statements. But it’s a tension that keeps Mary open to her future and God’s future. Even if Mary doesn’t understand exactly how God is at work in her life, she is still creating room for God’s new creation to come into being through her.

This is part of the reason why it’s such a tragedy that Mary has been largely expunged from our traditions. Because we need to hear stories of people like Mary. People who play pivotal roles in God’s mission in the world, even if they don’t always understand what lies ahead of them. Even when their doubts aren’t totally patched up. That the archetype of our faith, is not someone with a PhD in theology, not someone who is ordained minister, not someone with some exceptional skill set, but someone with the courage to say both, “How can this be?” and “Here I am.”

One of the great artistic renderings of the annunciation is from the workshop of Robert Campin, who was a Dutch painter. And most paintings of the annunciation show the dialogue between Mary and the angel Gabriel. They’re depictions of Mary trying to figure out what God’s plan for her life is. Her entire life has just been upended and she’s trying to decide what to do.

But the painting from Campin’s workshop is a little different. It shows the exact moment before the annunciation happens. On one side of the painting, Joseph is at work in his workshop, surrounded by his tools and wood shavings. And in the room next door, Mary is leaning on a bench, absorbed in a book she’s reading. And next to Mary is the angel Gabriel, who looks like he just realized he can’t get Mary’s attention without startling her. Gabriel has his hand up like he’s getting ready to apologize for startling her, but, let’s be honest, the most startling part is still to come.

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

It's an arresting painting largely because it captures the tension that's present in Luke's story. The moment before Mary's world is about to be turned upside down and ours as well. A painting that feels fitting for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Right after this story, Mary will go run off to see her sister Elizabeth. And her sister Elizabeth will say, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." What makes Mary blessed is not that she was the mother of Christ. It's that she had faith in the promises of God. That God would keep God's promises. Mary's blessing is not something that she keeps to herself but something that we are all invited to share. We are blessed whenever we remember our baptisms around the font or gather around the table or gather to hear the Word of God. God greets us with those same words the angel Gabriel greeted Mary with. "Blessed are you."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor