

Luke 1.26-38
Isaiah 61.1-4
3rd Sunday of Advent

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Central Presbyterian Church
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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

It Takes Two

For several years now when I hear this story I am set to wondering what would have happened if Mary had said, “No, thanks” at the end of the angel Gabriel’s speech. Or if she had just gone on with her reading or needle-point or canning or whatever it was. Kept her head down until the whoosh-ing of wings was gone and then she could go on about her life with no interruption and no disruption to the ordinary expectations of her life.

Three years ago I wondered aloud in my sermon whether perhaps Mary was Gabriel’s fourth stop of the morning in his assignment to find a young woman who would bear Jesus.

After that sermon one of you emailed me and said, that yes, the angel was seeing Mary on his fourth stop. “The first three women didn’t get the ultimate nod because of their boyfriends. Mary was the first to have a fellow who looked like he could become a Partner In The Plan.”¹

When I titled my sermon “It Takes Two” I was thinking about the invitation of God and the necessity of our response. God doesn’t just impose the divine will on us and say, “There you have it. Jesus finally has a mother.” God extends an invitation. We respond in some manner.

Perhaps I should have titled my sermon “It Takes Three”—taking into account as well the importance of Joseph’s response to this invitation.

But I’ll stick with “It Takes Two” since there isn’t always a Joseph in our lives. A lot of the time it’s just God and us.

Now there’s not a lot of scholarly commentary on pondering what might have happened had Mary declined the invitation. That didn’t happen so the text doesn’t explore that opportunity. And most commentators reflect upon what is in the text—there’s not so much on what might also have been a possible story for the bible had things not gone quite the way they ended up turning out. (Well, if you’re Jewish you have more of it—and it’s called “midrash”—but unfortunately, I think, we don’t have much of that in our tradition.)

So as I went in search of other resources I remembered that one of my favorite poets, Denise Levertov, had written a poem about Mary and Gabriel’s encounter. I couldn’t recall the poem—just that I thought there was such a one. But when I read it, it was exactly what I’d been thinking and wondering about: the choicefulness of Mary and all the opportunities we have to say yes or to turn away from God’s invitation.

Because Denise Levertov says it so beautifully, I’m going to read the whole poem and I won’t need to say much at the end.

It begins with a quote from the Akathistos hymn – the most famous Byzantine hymn to the Virgin Mary. “Hail, space for the uncontained God.”

This is “Annunciation” by Denise Levertov. [The poem is not reprinted here. It can be found in Denise, Levertov, *A Door in the Hive*, New York: New Directions, 1989.]

¹ Correspondence with Bruce Tjaden.

[following the poem:]

God invites us.
We too are free
to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Do we turn away in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief?
Or do we open ourselves utterly to the divine mystery?