

The Tradition of Annunciation

4th Sunday of Advent – Year A

Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, (7c, 10b)

Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-24

When we think of the Annunciation we are inclined to think Gabriel's visit to Mary. Read in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, this event is celebrated as a liturgical feast nine months before Christmas, and is reflected upon as the first mystery of the entire Rosary. Are we aware, however, that there are numerous annunciations throughout Scripture, only four of which concern the Birth of Jesus?

Stories of divine or angelic announcement of the impending birth of a great figure are found in the Old Testament. For example, it is to Abraham that the three visitors announce the future birth of Isaac (Gen 18:10). Sarah chuckles at the absurdity of giving birth in her old age (Gen 18:12-15). In the Book of Judges, an angel announces to Manoah and his wife that they will have a son, whom they name Samson (Jdg 13:1-25).

This tradition continues in the Gospel Infancy Narratives, where there are no less than five annunciations between the Gospels of Luke and Matthew connected to Christ's birth.

The first Annunciation, found in Matthew's Gospel is not to Mary, but to Joseph (Mt 1:20-23). In the very first chapter of the New Testament the

Annunciation to Joseph, reluctant to take Mary as his wife, is received in a dream when an unidentified angel reveals that Mary's child is conceived through the Holy Spirit. Included is the angel's quotation of Isaiah's prophecy regarding the virgin birth of Emmanuel. This Annunciation is read annually during the Christmas Vigil Mass and every three years on the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A).

At the beginning of Luke's Infancy Narrative, an angel, at first unidentified, announces not the impending birth of Christ, but of John the Baptist – the Annunciation to Zechariah (Lk 1:8-22). Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are advanced in years. Like Sarah, Zechariah is somewhat doubtful. When Zechariah expresses his skepticism the angel dramatically identifies himself – "*I am Gabriel, who stand in attendance before God*" (see also Dan 8:16ff, 9:21ff).

Gabriel, now identified, then pays a visit to the Virgin Mary, in the story that has developed in our tradition as the Annunciation above all annunciations (Lk 1:26-38). This passage is read in our Mass each year within the octave before Christmas, and every third year on the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B). While it



The Annunciation

is the most familiar, this is by no means the last of the annunciations in the Gospel of Luke.

The Annunciation to the Shepherds occurs when Jesus is born; a Gospel story read at every Christmas Midnight Mass. An angel appears to them as they tend their sheep outside Bethlehem to announce the birth of the Savior (Lk 2:8-14). He offers the sign of the swaddling clothes and the manger and inspires the shepherds to seek the child out.

Finally, there is an annunciation of sorts spoken of as Luke writes of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The Annunciation to Simeon, however, is not given by an angel, but by the Holy Spirit. While we do not read of this event first hand, it is still told in hindsight – *“It was revealed to [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not experience death until he had seen the Anointed of the Lord”* (Lk 2:26). After this annunciation, Simeon is on the lookout for the Christ and rejoices when he finally lays eyes on him (Lk 2:28-29).

In Luke, each of these annunciations is followed by a canticle of joy. The Annunciation to Zechariah is followed by the “Benedictus”, proclaimed by Zechariah when his tongue is loosened following the birth of John (Lk 1:67-79). After receiving her Annunciation, Mary visits Elizabeth, before whom she utters the “Magnificat” (Lk 1:46-55). The Annunciation to the



Shepherds is followed by the “Gloria”, sung by the multitude of the heavenly host (Lk 2:14). Finally, after we are told of the Annunciation to Simeon, the old man holds Jesus in his arms and utters his Canticle, known as the “Nuc Dimitis” – *“Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace...”* (Lk 2:29-32).

Annunciations are by no means limited to Christ’s birth. What reflection on Annunciation would be complete without including perhaps the

most important, even if not the most widely regarded, of all angelic annunciations? Found in all three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this angelic annunciation is found, not at the beginning, but rather at the very end. Given to the women who discover the empty tomb, this angelic message has echoed down the centuries as the very center of the Good News of Jesus Christ – *“He is Risen!”*

For the Gospel of Matthew, however, (and the 4th Sunday of Advent, Year A) we are graced with the annunciation story of an angelic visit, not to a virgin, but to a “good and upright” carpenter, in the small, seemingly insignificant town of Nazareth.

Fr. William Nicholas
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