

Sermon: The Annunciation

Luke 1:26-38

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Intro

Advent and Christmas are a month of sadness for many people. Lonely people, people who faced a loss in their life, sick people. The Christian faith is not a denial of the reality of misery. But in the midst of our darkness, we also see the light of joy

Not because our life is so good. But because our Lord came to bring gladness in this world and in our lives.

The first word spoken by the Angel Gabriel to Mary, was: rejoice!

1 The Greeting

Our bible translations have usually just translated this as 'greetings!, Mary!'.

We also know these words in old English, 'Hail Mary', or in Latin, in the ancient translation of St Jerome., 'Ave Maria'.

But the angel Gabriel addressed the young girl really not just with 'hello' or 'greetings'.

He used a much more interesting word to greet the virgin. Gabriel said: 'Rejoice'.

In those days in Israel, the normal thing to say if you met someone was 'shalom, peace', just as here in Egypt people say 'salaam'.

In the early church, the fathers were already aware that this greeting of Gabriel was really surprising. St Origen of Alexandria said in one of his sermons: "The angel greeted Mary in a new way, which I could not find anywhere else in Scripture. The greeting was reserved for Mary alone. (Homilies on the gospel of Luke 6.7.)

But how do we actually know what the angel said to Mary? Is all this not very speculative? Is this not just a sweet nice story?

Well, Luke at the beginning of his Gospel underlines that he wanted to write not just a sweet story, but history.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and

servants of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you.

How could Luke write an orderly account of what happened in the privacy of Mary's room, when she met the angel?

A few times we read of Mary that she 'ponders words in her heart.' Why would Luke write this, except for underlining that he has his knowledge directly from Mary herself, or at least from someone to whom she recounted what actually happened? Mary remembered the words, and she later spoke about it.

'Rejoice Mary', is what the angel told her.

And these same words are also addressed at us, for instance by St Paul in his letter to the church in Phillipi: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (4:4)

Joy is what the Gospel is about. Joy is the gift of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. If we miss joy, let us go to God and look at the Christmas child. The Lord Jesus came to this world for us and for our salvation and that is very Good News. A reason to rejoice.

This is not joy because our whole life is so easy, or because God gives us all we want. It is joy because the Lord is in our midst, in the midst even of our thick darkness.

That was also the reason for Mary to rejoice.

'Rejoice Mary, because you are highly favored.' The first Latin Bible translation of St Jerome translated this as: you are full of grace. 'Plena gratiae.'

Full of grace is not a bad translation, as long as we do not make it to mean that because Mary was a perfect girl, God chose her for her special mission in life. It rather means, 'God has showered his grace on you and in you.' The grace of becoming the mother of our Lord.

Of course, if God showers his grace on her, she also has something to give away. Just as when he blesses you, you become a blessing for others.

2 The Girl

The greeting of the angel seems to draw from an ancient theme in the Hebrew bible, from the prophet Zephaniah 3:14-17. I will quote some sentences from this:

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!

The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save.

Rejoice daughter of Zion,
the Lord is in your midst.

In your midst also has the meaning of: inside yourself. And that became very true for Mary. She was told to rejoice, because she was to carry the Lord in her womb.

Mary is presented by Luke as the daughter of Zion in person. The term daughter of Zion is used in the Old Testament for the temple, for Jerusalem, and for the people of God as a whole.

The angel, in Luke 1:35, explains to Mary that she will become pregnant because "the Holy spirit comes over you". This is actually temple language, and it is language related to God's presence in his sanctuary.

After Israel had returned from exile in babylon, God had not returned to his temple, but now - the angel promises that God is coming to his temple. Mary seems to appear as the tent of God, the place where man and God meet. She is the one who brings the Son of God and the truly human Man into the world.

In order to be used by God in such a history-making way, the young woman, says 'yes Lord'. We hear with amazement her clear-sounding "Yes! Let it be to me according to your word".

Mary placed herself body and soul at the disposal of the God who loved her and who, by means of this promised pregnancy and childbirth, was bestowing upon her an very precious blessing.

The first woman in the Bible, Eve, in freedom decided to take the fruit from the forbidden tree and she brought just trouble into the world. And now Mary, freely, said 'yes' to God. God's salvation of this world and of us is tied to the 'yes' of a teenage girl. She brings the source of our salvation into the world.

No wonder we still speak of her with reverence. She is not our savior, but her 'yes' opened the door for the Savior to come to this world.

Our 'yes' to God can also have great impact. Never the impact that Mary had with her obedience. But our obedience to God - our love for Him, our love for each other - also has far-reaching impact. It not only makes God and his angels rejoice, but love and obedience changes the course of history in ways we will never know.

So Mary is a great example for us. How do we respond to the will of God? Do we say 'yes' to what God asks us to do? Obedience to God unlocks the door to great promises.

3 The Promise

Mary with her 'yes' became the bridgehead for the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. But not to Israel alone. Her 'yes' brought the promises that God made to Abraham - also to you and me.

The angel draws from the great promises of God in the Old Testament.

Your Son, Mary "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

The early English church father, the Venerable Bede, explains this well:

The house of Jacob [he says] refers to the universal church, which through its faith in and confession of Christ receives the heritage of the patriarchs - either among those who took their physical origin from the stock of the patriarchs [Jews] or among those who, though brought forth with respect to the flesh from other countries, were reborn in Christ by the spiritual washing. (Homilies on the gospels 1.3.)

Well said by Bede. With the coming of Jesus the Kingdom of God burst out of the seams of Israel only, to fill the earth for ever.

In Mary's time king Herod sat on the throne of Israel - but he was not from house of David, not even Jewish. His cruelty also made a mockery of the idea of kingship as promised to David. The angel announced to Mary: 'God has not forgotten his promise. And when he fulfills it, there is no end to it.'

His kingdom will have no end - this sentence has been added to the Creed that we repeat each week.

But it's not just future tense. We also already live in it right now. His kingdom stretches from sea to sea, all over the world, even though it is not a kingdom of this world.

I think some of you come from church backgrounds where they think that when Jesus returns, he will first create a sort of temporary kingdom for a 1000 years. That kingdom, in the minds of some Christians, is the time when the Old Testament promises to Israel must be literally fulfilled. But only for a restricted period. Jesus will sit on the throne of David, and after all that is finished, eternity will overwhelm the universe and God will be all in all.

But the angel does not speak at all of a temporary rule of Jesus on the Davidic throne. The angel emphatically, by using parallelism, underlines that the kingdom and the throne that Jesus will take, will last eternally. "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The mighty rulers of this world have sometimes aligned with this kingdom, and the church has sometimes aligned itself with the powers of this world. This has usually been an unhappy alliance.

The kingdom of our Lord is founded on faith and love, not on power or weapons. It is a Kingdom based on Jesus Christ, and nothing in this Kingdom can be out of line with his character as we know him.

It is the kingdom, the rule of grace and truth established in the hearts and lives of all those who have the God of Jacob as their refuge....

In the words of Paul, this kingdom is one of 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17)

Conclusion

Righteousness, peace and joy are words we hear echoing in all the Christmas stories. Joy is the gift of God to us. Joy to the world!

Joy was God's gift to Mary, as she had the privilege to bring the Savior of mankind into our world. We must be very thankful for her 'yes', and repeat her 'yes' personally to God as well. 'Yes God, I am your servant. Sent me Lord...'

Saying this to God and doing it, brings Kingdom-of-Jesus-joy into our lives.

And this, His, kingdom will last forever and it only gets better.

But this joy, as I said in the beginning, is not because our circumstances become nicer because we follow our Lord.

Look at what happened to Mary - the angel departed from her. After this, there were no more angels around Mary.

The Mother of our Lord walked the dark path of even losing her beloved son on a cross without the comfort of angels. How often she must have pondered in her heart the words, 'Rejoice, full of grace... and the comforting words 'do not be afraid'.

But with these words she had to do.

The angel left her and she had to face life with all of its darkness, by faith in God alone.

But it is this faith in God - Father Son and Holy Spirit -
Expressed in obedience of love and a clear 'yes' to God,
that makes the deepest joy break through the clouds,
to brighten our lives.

Amen