

“A Weighty Calling”

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:26-38

Unlike the religious paintings of the day known for their traditionally idealized reflection of Christianity, the Italian painter Caravaggio (1571 – 1610) often chose subjects from the streets to be the characters of his artwork. Whereas most religious works were “cleaner” in their reflection of humanity, Caravaggio strove for a more “earthly” quality in his artwork

The Annunciation (1608-9) represents this earthly quality very well. Caravaggio’s painting reflects the deep, soul-penetrating effect of the angel Gabriel’s news upon Mary’s life – *a young, unmarried woman* has been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. This is God’s calling for her life. This is how I want us to understand this news that the angel, God’s messenger, brings to Mary. I want us to understand the news of the angel as God’s calling for Mary’s life. She is to be the mother of our Lord.

The news is good news, to be sure. But it is also true that Mary and Joseph did not at first receive this news in the same way one would receive good news. The news that the angel brings is shocking for them. The news would have especially been shocking for a first century Jewish culture. The news will bring public shame and humiliation to Mary and Joseph and their families.



The Annunciation (c. 1608-1609)
by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
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As you reflect upon Caravaggio’s painting of the annunciation and consider the account of the annunciation as we heard it from St. Luke this morning, an amazing thing happens. You become drawn into Mary’s story. The painter uses a technique called *tenebrism* to draw you into the event of the annunciation and help you identify and empathize with Mary. *Tenebrism* is a painting technique that contrasts light and dark in an image so that darkness becomes a dominating feature. The darkness then communicates a mood to the viewer of the painting. In Caravaggio’s painting of the annunciation the effect of the *tenebrism* technique is that the viewer feels the weight of this call that God has placed upon Mary’s life. You begin to identify with her. You begin to feel the burden. You feel the shame. You feel the pain.

Pain. Burden. Suffering. Difficulty. Shame. *Such can be the feelings and effect when one receives the call of God upon their lives.*

We often want to hear God's call in our lives, don't we? We hope God will trumpet out some announcement about what job to take, where to live, who to take as a spouse in Holy Matrimony, how we can best provide security for our families, which major to select in college, or which friends to hang out with in school. Christians are sometimes encouraged by pastors and peers to try and discern what God's calling is for their life. And so Christians can spend a lot of time in prayer, in self-reflection, and in conversation with others trying to determine their calling in life and what God wants to them to do. Christians can spend a lot of time determining what God wants to do through them to share his love with others.

Interestingly enough, though, very often that discerned "calling" conveniently happens to be a positive one for the recipient. When we think about God's calling for us we might often consider only those callings that appear to be beneficial and advantageous for us from a worldly perspective. For instance, with the famous exception of Mother Teresa, it is not often that Christians determine that God has called them to poverty. It is not often that we determine as God's people that God has called us to experience pain, wallow in loneliness, struggle with cancer, or endure other forms of suffering, burdens, difficulties, or shame. And yet, these are often the crosses God gives us in this life as Christians.

We are reminded of the words of Jesus to his first followers, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). The calling of God upon our lives often comes with pain, loneliness, struggle, suffering, burden, difficulty, and even shame. Just consider Mary and God's calling upon her life.

The Italian painter Caravaggio understood that when God calls us, that calling is rarely advantageous, or beneficial for us, or coming at the preferred time. In *The Annunciation*, Caravaggio reflected Mary's calling by God to become the mother of the Christ. God's calling for Mary did not initially appear to be beneficial or advantageous for her. Mary is not portrayed in the painting as a woman who was jumping up and down that she would have the Christ, but as a woman who was silently ingesting this very sobering calling. Yes, Mary would accept this calling and yes, Mary would gladly carry out this calling, but that did not mean it was easy. Being an unwed, pregnant, teenager is never easy in this world, especially in a Middle Eastern culture in the first century. Mary was indeed called to greatness; to bear great embarrassment and shame with grace knowing that God's calling is not always easy or pleasant.

In baptism God calls out to us. He announces that we are now His children and that the devil is now our enemy and that for the rest of our lives we will war against our sinful flesh and this world. God does not promise that our lives in this world will be financially bountiful or filled with the passing luxuries of this dying world. What God does promise in this world is that He will give us the priceless gift of faith and

trust in Christ and that one day we will receive the treasure of eternal life. God's calling in this world is great and wonderful, just not in the way this world views greatness. God calls us to believe that our sins really are forgiven. God calls us to believe He cares for us no matter what. God calls us to believe that He listens, hears, and answers our prayers. God calls us to believe that He comes in bread and wine. God calls us to believe that He works to strengthen our faith in our hymns and the church's liturgy. God calls us to believe that even after our bones have turned to dust that we will live again. God does call us. He calls us every day to believe in the wonderful things He is doing in our lives even as we live as the mothers, wives, husbands, fathers, children, students, parishioners, coworkers, employees, and neighbors that he has called us to be.

At the end our account of the annunciation to Mary we hear her response. The whole time in the reading, as St. Luke records it, Mary listens to the angel Gabriel and takes in this shocking news, attempting to digest God's calling for her life. She finally speaks. We hear her words in the last verse of our reading, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Words of trust. Words of faith. Words of a servant. Words of obedience. May God continue to increase our faith and trust to shape us more and more into obedient servants who are content with his calling upon our lives. Amen.