

Fourth Weekend of Advent (RCL/B): The Annunciation
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38
December 19-20, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Those of you who have seen this weekend's worship booklet on-line have been treated to a feast for the eyes. Ned chose for the cover the painting *The Annunciation* by Henry Ossawa Tanner. The angel appears as a pillar of light at the foot of the bed of young, barely teen-aged, black-haired Mary. She's not wearing a veil and isn't wearing shoes either. She's wrapped in a robe and looks more like she's been awakened from sleep than interrupted in prayer. Her hands are maybe folded, maybe clenched as she looks on with some mix of confusion and wonder. She's a bit scrunched against the wall. No wonder Gabriel is quick to say, "Don't be afraid!"

There's a throw-rug laid on the stone floor and a blanket hung on the stone walls, and the geometric designs make me think more of the American Southwest than Israel. With Tanner's middle name being Ossawa, I wonder if he enjoyed some Native American heritage that he references in the painting. We do know Tanner was African American. His father was a former slave who became a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His mother was an escaped slave who traveled on the Underground Railroad to freedom in Pennsylvania. They prospered, attained social standing, and were able to offer their son a good education. He'd been born in Pittsburgh, but raised in Philly. He was one of the first black students to enroll there in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

After a stint as a photographer in Atlanta, Tanner moved to Paris, where he and his work were welcomed in the prestigious French Salon. Unlike American journalists, the French press reviewed his work without feeling the need to reference his skin color. Some

of his other paintings (e.g. *The Thankful Poor* and *The Banjo Player*) show real black people not minstrel-like stereotypes. Lifelong he worked to improve race relations; he was a member of the National Citizens Rights Association, predecessor of the NAACP. It seems fitting that we're viewing Tanner's painting of the Annunciation, for in Mary's Magnificat, her song of praise (so named because it begins, "*My soul magnifies the Lord,*" Luke 1:46), she sings about God lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, exalting the humble, raising the downtrodden. The son of slaves surely knew and cared about such things.

Mary's song has nothing to do with preserving the status quo. There's nothing in it that'll lull us to sleep with same ol', same ol' lyrics. It sounds more like, "Shake it up! Shake it up!" than *Silent Night*. Mary's song is nothing less than revolutionary, just like God's action in the world. The "haves" become the "have nots." The "have nots" become the "haves." The social order is turned upside down:

*He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.*

Luke 1:51-53 (*The Message*)

That's good news for the poor, good news for the vulnerable, good news for the disenfranchised. But it's sobering, "Wake up and smell the coffee!" news for anyone who victimizes the poor and the vulnerable. That's why the Magnificat was considered dangerous by the repressive governments in Central America during the 1970's and 1980's. In El Salvador it was forbidden to proclaim that passage from Luke's Gospel during public worship. That's the era when Christian missionaries were killed for teaching literacy to the peasants. Peasants who can read and write can advocate for themselves. Their

government didn't want to deal with dissent. Better to kill the teachers. Better to keep Good News muzzled.

God makes a promise to King David in our first lesson from 2 Samuel: a descendant of David will sit on his throne forever, reign over his kingdom forever. God even says, "*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*" (2 Samuel 7:14) This is the promise of a Messiah, whom we recognize as our Lord Jesus, born 1,000 years after the prophecy is made. One thousand years.... A long time to wait.

And here we are 2,000 years later. The poor, the hungry, those dispossessed of home or country or livelihood are still with us, awaiting not spiritual but material redemption. God often chooses to use us as human channels for Heaven's answers to their prayers, if we are willing. Today's prayer of the day includes this petition:

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, **free us from the sin that would obstruct your mercy**, that willingly we may bear your redeeming love to all the world....

My sins can obstruct **God's** mercy?? My failures in love can clog the arteries of God's grace??

What sins of mine obstruct God's mercy? The sin of my self-centeredness that says, "As long as **I** have enough, 'God's in His Heaven and all's right with the world'"? The sin of my nearsightedness which can't see that many of the blessings that have come **to** me are intended to flow **through** me to others? My comfort with the status quo that prevents me from lobbying for change that would benefit those who don't have enough to hold body and soul together? Maybe I need to seriously consider the possibility that my unwillingness to say "Count me in!" like Mary's "*let it be with me according to your Word,*" my lack of availability to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry can slow the delivery of God's mercy.

The stereotype of Jesus' mother is "Mary, prayerful and patient," "Mary, meek and mild," but she was actually quite the risk-taker, wouldn't you say? People of faith **have** to be. Mary, barely a teenager, was willing to drive beyond the headlights of what she could see, because she trusted God to map the route and journey with her. She had a fiancé but not a husband, she had lots of faith but not a lot of experience, she had no credentials to become the mother of our Lord except the essential fact that God had found favor with her. Maybe part of what God smiled upon was Mary's realization that more broadly God had found favor with God's people, and especially with the lowly ones, the poor ones, the disinherited ones, the no-account ones, the vulnerable ones. And so that very young, black-haired, barefoot woman in Tanner's painting, transfixed by the angelic light at the bottom of her bed, becomes the Theotokos, the God-bearer. 2,000 years later, we are also called to be God-bearers, to "bear [God's] redeeming love to all the world."

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that would obstruct your mercy, that willingly we may bear your redeeming love to all the world....

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham