

## **The Annunciation** (Exodus 3:1-14; Acts 22:3-15; Luke 1:26-38)

From a past history course, we probably all remember the name of Charlemagne. Also known as Charles the Great, Charlemagne was the first Holy Roman Emperor. He promoted the arts and education and thus the Renaissance. Throughout the ages, Charlemagne has been recognized as the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages. Nonetheless, quite a story is told by historians about his funeral procession.

With a lot of pomp and circumstance, Charlemagne's funeral procession left his castle and headed for the cathedral (at Aix). When the royal casket arrived at the cathedral, it was met by the local bishop, who was standing in front of the closed cathedral door, barring entrance. "Who comes?" the bishop asked. "Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire," answered the emperor's proud herald. "Him I know not," the bishop replied. "Who comes?" The herald, a bit shaken, tried again, replying, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth." "Him I know not," the bishop said again. "Who comes?" The herald, now completely humbled, quietly responded, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ." To which the bishop, Christ's representative, responded, "Enter! Receive Christ's gift of life!"

This story makes the point that no matter who we are, no matter what we achieve in this life, we all fall short of the glory of God. We're all needy. We're all in need of God's grace. Charlemagne, Mother Teresa, you, and me. None of us will ever be wise enough, good enough, clean enough, holy enough to earn entrance into the presence of God. Knowing this can be not only humbling but also depressing. Just this last week when I was working on this message at a coffee shop, a woman in her 80s came up to me and talked about her worry, bordering on torment, about living her life so she'll be worthy upon her death to be in God's presence.

But, you know, sometimes we focus so much on living in God's presence in the future that we miss living in God's presence in the present. And sometimes we focus so much on trying to earn God's presence that we miss him drawing near to us in grace. The Bible is full of stories that tell us that the holy God has chosen to be with us, imperfect us, even now, in the midst of our everyday busy, messy, imperfect living.

Moses was tending the sheep when he lifted his eyes and noticed a burning bush that never burned up. So he said to himself, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." And because of this openness to looking beyond himself, "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he (Moses) said, 'Here I am.' Then he (God) said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'" And thus began the famous relationship that Moses had with God.

God chose to have a relationship with Moses, even though Moses was far from holy enough to be in relationship with God. As proof of this, all we have to do is remember how Moses came up with excuse after excuse when God wanted him to go back to Egypt to help him deliver the Hebrews from slavery. It was obvious that Moses had a hard time completely trusting God. But the more time Moses spent with God, the more he learned to trust God, and the closer he grew to God. And what wonders God accomplished in and through Moses' life! And all because Moses, in the midst of his daily work, tending the sheep, lifted up his eyes, looked beyond himself, and was open to God's presence.

The same thing could be said of countless others on the pages of our Bible. There was the young boy Samuel awakened by a sound, explained by the old Prophet Eli as God trying to get the boy's attention. And there was Jacob who was traveling when he had a dream about "a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Paying attention to what he was seeing, suddenly Jacob heard God speaking to him, blessing him with land, offspring, and being a blessing to others. And when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he was wise enough to know that God had indeed been with him. And thus Jacob exclaimed those wonderful words, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" Samuel was a mere boy, Eli an imperfect priest, Jacob, a trickster who had cheated his brother out of his birthright. Nonetheless, God wanted to have a relationship with them, and they were perceptive enough to sense God's presence with them.

Same thing with Saul. He was going about his business, and it wasn't even good business. He was on his way to Damascus to hunt down and persecute more Christians. Nonetheless, God was with him, and in the midst of his journey, he became aware of the presence of God, and thus began a relationship with God that changed his life, as well as the lives of all with whom he came into contact as the Apostle Paul.

Our gospel lesson for today lifts up the young girl Mary who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. She probably thought her life would be a very ordinary one. She and Joseph would marry, have a family, and do their best to live as good Jews. But Mary's life ended up being far from ordinary because, like so many before her, she was open to the holy in the midst of her daily living. Thus Mary perceived God speaking to her, saying, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." And the experience was so wondrous, that Mary responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This experience of Mary's described in our gospel lesson for today is usually called "The Annunciation," a word which means "announcement." The story is all about the announcement of God's presence in Mary's life, the announcement of something wondrous that God was going to do in and through Mary's life, the announcement of Emmanuel, God With Us.

Friends, I believe that this announcement of God's presence in Mary's life is simultaneously an announcement of God's desire to be an abiding presence in our lives. In fact, I believe that all these stories we've looked at from our Bibles today were annunciations--God's announcements that he wants to be a comforting, healing, inspiring, correcting, challenging, transforming, empowering, ministering presence in our lives, that he wants to do something wondrous in and through our lives, just as he did for those individuals in the Bible.

We don't have to wait until we're good enough to earn God's presence with us. God's waiting right now to have a close personal relationship with each one of us. We don't have to wait until we die to live in the presence of God. God is all around us, in our everyday living, eager for us to "turn aside" and encounter him. Eager for us to exclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!" Eager for us to realize that, even though we fall short

of the glory of God, even if we feel like the one lost sheep, we, like Mary are "favored" by God, loved by God. Eager for us too to exclaim, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word!"

But how rare it is for us to do this. How rare it is for us to perceive God's presence with us--to sense his love for us--to enter into such an intimate relationship with him that our lives are transformed. And I think this is rare for us only because we miss the announcements of God's presence with us.

With Samuel and Eli and Mary, God used a quiet voice to announce his presence. In reality, no doubt very much like that story of how God announced his presence to the Prophet Elijah. Elijah went out and stood on a mountain, waiting for the Lord, and as scripture expresses it, "there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces...but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" How often do we go off to a quiet place and hear the sound of sheer silence? More typically, we wake up to music, then turn on the morning shows, and listen to our radio or Ipod or talk on the phone when we get in our car. We watch television while we cook and eat our meals. We put the timer on the television so that we fall asleep with the sound. How many annunciations of God's presence we no doubt miss each and every day because of the noise that drowns him out.

With Moses and Jacob and the Apostle Paul, God used light to announce his presence. All too often, though, we miss the light of God's presence because we keep our heads down. Life has a way of breaking us and bending us, bowing us low. The loss of loved ones. Loneliness. Physical problems. Physical Pain. Aging. Choices we don't know how to make. People who disappoint us. Abuse. Crime. War. Drive-by shootings. Suicides. Lost jobs. Financial pressures. Bills to pay. Food to put on the table. No time for ourselves. Frustration. Bitterness. Anger. Depression. Despair. How many annunciations of God's presence we no doubt miss each and every day because we don't look up and beyond our own misery.

Yes, because of the difficulty and noise of our lives, it's easy for us to miss God's annunciations of his presence with us. We're then like the child who went with her father and mother to a service of worship at their church and that night said in her prayers "... and, Lord, we had a good time at church today. I wish you could have been there!"

This season is all about the fact that God is with us. It's Advent. God wants to come into our lives. For this to happen, however, we need to expect the annunciations of God's presence with us. And we need to change our lives so that we need to make our lives more hospitable to him. More quiet time. More positive, hopeful living. God may come to us in the beauty of a fresh snowfall, in the encouraging hug of a friend, in a suggestion in a sermon, in the silence of Holy Communion, in a challenge to step outside our comfort zone, in the aftermath of something we did or said that we shouldn't have, in our fear.

On July 23, 2002, nine miners in Western Pennsylvania became trapped in a flooded mine. The injured and desperate men tied themselves together so that the stronger ones could sustain the weaker ones as they waited to be rescued. Journalists from across the nation reported the rescue effort, which took five long days. No one could believe it when all nine miners emerged safely from the mine. On July 30, the people of the small mining community gathered for a worship service to thank God for saving the miners' lives. At the ceremony, there were ten miners' lamps set up on the altar, even though there were only nine miners. According to the pastor who presided over the worship celebration, the tenth lamp represented God's presence, which the miners claimed they could feel as they waited to be rescued. It was this "10th Man" they honored as they read Psalm 103: "Praise the Lord . . . Who redeems your life from the pit."

May the Lord's presence become as real to us as it did to those miners, to Mary, to the Apostle Paul, Eli, Samuel, Jacob, and Moses. Thus may the Lord daily comfort, heal, and encourage us. Thus may the Lord daily correct us, instruct us, challenge us, and use us as his instruments in the world. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 13, 2009