



WELCOME THE WORD: The Annunciation

Ideal for individual and group discussions.

If you're part of a group, one person may like to light a candle to still everyone's thoughts. One person may wish to read the text aloud to the group or all prefer to read it in silence.



Ecce Ancilla Domini! *The Annunciation*, 1849-50, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) Acquisition.
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In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel 'But how can this come about since I have no knowledge of man?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God. And I tell you this too: your cousin Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and she who people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' And Mary said, 'You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her.

Luke 1:26-38

You want me to do what?

Rossetti was heavily criticised for this painting as being far too human and not holy enough. Yet he still relies on earlier traditions for many of the symbols he places in the scene, but his method of employing these symbols, his depiction of space, and most significantly his portrayal of the two figures represent significant departures from earlier tradition.

His goal was to mix contemporary realism with religious feeling. Usually Mary is shown in studious contemplation, but here she rises awkwardly from her bed as though disturbed while asleep. Rossetti used white as the dominant colour to reinforce the idea of feminine purity. In giving Mary the lilies, Gabriel presents her with an embodiment of the chastity and virginity she is associated with throughout her life. Rather than dressed in red or blue, as is the case with most Annunciation paintings, Mary wears a simple white nightdress. This was as rare as imagining Mary in pyjamas today! The only red we see is in the embroidery at the bottom right which she has just finished and which Rossetti began in an earlier picture of Mary as a child.

Instead of using her name, Gabriel gave her a title, a most strange title for an ordinary peasant girl living in a town of no consequence: "kecharitomene." Kecharitomene is translated as "favoured" or "full of grace." but is more accurately translated: "You who have been and are now filled with divine favour." No-one except Mary has been greeted this way by an angel and Gabriel uses the term only once.

The Holy Spirit and the New Ark

As most Annunciation scenes have candles that have just blown out because of the entrance of the Holy Spirit, so Rossetti paints a wall sconce in the top middle with the hint of a flame. Rossetti includes a dove, embodying the Holy Spirit as a traditional symbol. And next in our passage we read that the angel Gabriel tells Mary "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "Overshadow" here comes from the Greek words - *epi* meaning "over," and *skia* meaning "a shadow." The word means to *envelop in shadow*. It came from the Old Testament idea of a cloud symbolizing the immediate presence and power of God. This cloud is none other than the Shekinah (the Hebrew word) for the visible Presence of God. It appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai, and it remained in the Holy of Holies above the Ark of the covenant – in the most sacred part of the Jerusalem temple. Luke uses the same word for the Spirit's overshadowing of Mary. The angel Gabriel clearly drew a parallel between God's presence in the *Sanctuary* and *in Mary*. She is the new, living Ark, the living tabernacle and sanctuary of God chosen to bear the Messiah. Gabriel becomes the prophet drawing both from the past and on the future.

Compared with many Annunciation interiors rich with elaborate floor tiles, stained glass, wooden furniture, rugs, pillows, or set half outside with extensive foliage, the Virgin's bedroom in this painting is shockingly simple. White stone tiles cover the floor; the walls have white paint; the window has no panes, and the only object in the room not already mentioned is a simple, low wooden bed with a white mat and pillow against a blue screen.

Who am I before God?

As the conversation develops Mary is given a number of promises and prophecies about the role of her son that compare very similarly with those given to David and to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary quite literally becomes the bearer and the beholder of our Christian salvation. Mary was confused as she pondered what the angel's greeting could mean and shows us that God resides with us in silence, in stillness, in our openness, and in our desire for meaning. When we are all of these things the Spirit enters us. We are also reminded that God has unlimited patience to wait for us all to say yes, even when we are afraid.

Rather than a room that draws the viewer in and the eye is allowed to move through the scene to the back wall of the bedroom, Rossetti places Mary in a room that is almost claustrophobically small. The confined nature of the space, the barrenness of the surroundings, Mary's intense expression and her expressive pose all further the image of a young girl who is confronted with her own adult identity and is frightened. Instead of a winged, long-haired boyish angel, Rossetti paints an androgynous Gabriel, wingless, his face only visible in highly shadowed profile, with the hints of yellow flames around his feet.

Grace comes through a warning

Mary sits on her bed and cowers against the wall. She is markedly adolescent with her unbrushed straight hair, childish skinny body, and the hesitance, fear and melancholy with which she responds to the angel Gabriel's glorious pronouncement. Rossetti rejects the stiff, exaggerated poses of primitive Virgins who gaze in humble acceptance. He seems most concerned with the sincere response of a young girl who has been given a burden that is both wonderful but full of responsibility, and with very little warning!

Notice that one of the lilies Gabriel holds out is still in bud ready to flower. Notice that not all the lilies on the tapestry are in bloom either – these are signs of events to come, when Jesus will be born and Mary's life takes on a new hope but also a new sorrow. Finally, notice the composition's diagonals, verticals and horizontals. For such a simple painting it is remarkably balanced in all its plains. This annunciation might be a shock for Mary and for the world but it will bring order to our lives and grace into our hearts.

How does this painting help us to understand the annunciation for Mary?
How can it help us to deepen our faith this Advent?

Prayer

Creator God

Your marvels are indeed everywhere,
and nothing is impossible with God.
Today let us hear the messenger you send us,
and respond with an eager 'yes Lord'.
Amen.

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