

“MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, December 20, 2015—Advent IV

Higganum Congregational Church, 9:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church of Haddam, 10:30 a.m.

Making Disciples. Making a Difference.

Text: Luke 1:26-56

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Jan Richardson is an artist, a poet, a theologian, a pastor, and since December 2, 2013, a grieving widow. In April of 2010, she married the love of her life, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles. Two Advents ago, when Gary was undergoing surgery for a relatively minor condition, he suffered a massive stroke from which he never recovered. Jan had to make the difficult decision to end life support for her beloved husband.

Although I've only met Jan through her online writings and her artwork, I've been inspired by her writing and her art for a number of years. She has regularly led online Advent and Lenten retreats, some of which I've participated in. Understandably, since Gary's death, Jan hasn't been able to lead Advent retreats, but she has kept up her blog—"the Advent Door"—during this Advent season.

In her most recent post, titled "This Luminous Darkness: Searching for Solace in Advent and Christmas," Jan Richardson writes: "If I have learned anything about grief in the past two years, it is that grief is a wild creature....Just recently I found myself in the midst of an unmerry meltdown at the end of a day that included a trip to a local bookstore for a few presents. Gary and I had had our first date in that bookstore, and, over the years, had spent many happy hours in its café, our heads bent together over books, cups of tea and coffee in hand. Visiting the bookstore again, now decked out in its holiday finery and with Christmas music streaming through its speakers, provided one of the final triggers that prompted a spectacular Advent overload."

Grief is indeed a "wild creature," as Jan has learned in her own experience. She has also learned, as she writes, "that grief loves stories. Resistant as grief is to pat answers, logic, and linear thinking, it finds a natural home within the landscape of a story, where meaning appears not so much in facts or formulas as in metaphors, symbols, and the unpredictable pathways of narrative."

One of the biblical stories in which the "wild creature" of grief has found a home for Jan Richardson is the Advent story of Mary the mother of Jesus, the story we heard a few minutes ago. There are two scenes in this narrative. The first scene is traditionally referred to as the Annunciation—the angel Gabriel's message to Mary from God about her upcoming miraculous—and unexpected—pregnancy. The second scene is traditionally referred to as the Visitation—Mary's strenuous journey on foot to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is in the final trimester of her own miraculous—and unexpected—pregnancy.

Artists through the centuries have been captivated by these scenes in Mary's story, and have portrayed them in many and varied ways. One of my favorite representations of the Annunciation is a very large painting (about five feet high and six feet long) by Henry Ossawa Tanner that belongs to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.¹ (When my wife Mary and I visited the Philadelphia Museum a few years ago, there was a large blank space where Tanner's painting

was usually displayed; turns out it was on loan to a special Tanner retrospective at another museum. Seeing this artwork in person is still on my bucket list.)

The painting depicts Mary, sitting upright on the edge of her bed, wide awake, her head tilted slightly as she looks skeptically at a column of light, which may be the angel Gabriel, or perhaps the space just vacated by the angel Gabriel. Perhaps Gabriel's words are still echoing in her ears: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.' She could be the teenage girl Mary of Nazareth; or she could be a contemporary teenage girl living in humble circumstances.



What I see in this painting is a young woman who has heard the angel's words, and who is "troubled" or "perplexed" about what sort of message has come to her in this vision. She has heard the words of divine favor—"*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God*"—and she is just beginning to grasp what is both spoken and unspoken in these words. She is clearly not yet prepared to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Lutheran preacher and blogger Nadia Bolz-Weber tells the story of being at a retreat with a youth pastor when she was a teenager. The youth pastor was working hard to persuade this group of teenagers that "if we did not use swear words, or lie about anything, or listen to rock music, or have any kind of sexual inclination before we were married to someone of the opposite sex—if we were always cheerful, and never drank alcohol or were snarky then we would become worthy of God's favor."

Problem was, Nadia as a teenager couldn't see herself as someone who could live in such a way as to "become worthy of God's favor." So she tuned out the youth pastor "preaching to me about how my life should look. Because I just couldn't say yes to what seemed like God's conditional maybe toward me." Comparing her teenage experience of "God's conditional maybe" with the angel's greeting to Mary the Galilean teenager, the adult Nadia writes:

"We have no idea what Mary was like before this night the angel visited her—this night she said yes—but here's what I'm thinking: I seriously doubt that she made herself into a girl [whom] God could favor because she took the advice of her youth rabbi and lived the way she should. I think God looked upon her with favor because it is God's nature to look upon young peasant girls and prostitutes and tax collectors and adulterous kings and lawyers and [Roman soldiers] and fishermen [and grieving widows] with favor. Because God's just like that."

Yes, it is God's nature to look with favor on us flawed yet fantastic human beings. And it's human nature to be, at least initially, wildly perplexed about God's grace. So we shouldn't be surprised that Mary's response to the angel's initial greeting is silent bewilderment. Nor should we be surprised that there's some back and forth between Mary and God's messenger before Mary says "Yes" to the specific form God's favor will take.

You see, Mary's "Yes" to God's favor—to pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, discipleship, and heartrending grief at the foot of the cross—Mary's "Yes" to God's favor does not come from meek acquiescence, but rather from strength and courage. So does her journey on foot from Galilee to Judea to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who has also, in her own courageous and strong way, said "Yes" to God's favor.

This is why the flow of the narrative builds toward Mary's powerful song of praise and rejoicing, *"My soul [exalts] the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."* At the outset of the narrative, Mary was perplexed by the angel's announcement that she had found favor with God. At the climax of the narrative, she is fully confident and convinced that God's favor has found her.

In the two seasons of Advent since her husband's tragic and untimely death, the "wild creature" of Jan Richardson's grief has found "a natural home within the landscape of a story"—and especially within the landscape of the story of Mary and Elizabeth, which tells of how God has "looked with favor on the lowliness" of these two women.



Jan cautions her readers not to "miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. For the Christ who was born two millennia ago, for the Christ who seeks to be born in us this day, the darkness is where incarnation begins."

She asks, "Can we imagine the darkness as a place where God meets us—and not only meets us, but asks to take form in this world through us?" And she answers,

"Comfort, O comfort my people, we hear God cry out in an Advent text from Isaiah. If, in this life, I cannot do away with grief, then I pray that I will at least enter into it with a heart open to this comfort, this solace that is one of the

greatest treasures God offers us in the landscape of this season. This comfort is no mere pabulum, no saccharine wish. And though it is deeply personal, it is not merely that; solace does not leave us to our own solitude.

“True comfort opens our broken heart toward the broken heart of the world and, in that opening, illuminates a doorway, a threshold, a connection. It reveals to us a place where, in the company of heaven and earth, we can begin anew, bearing forth the solace we have found.”ⁱⁱ

Mary of Nazareth, the ancient sacred story reminds us, was at first troubled and perplexed by hearing that she had found with favor with God. We may at first be troubled and perplexed by the truth that our own brokenheartedness can “illuminate a doorway, a threshold, a connection” to the deep needs of our broken and beautiful world.

In the words of Glennon Doyle Melton, “When my heart is truly broken, I feel low, abiding joy. Because I know I’ve stumbled onto something worthy of my time, energy, money, and life.”ⁱⁱⁱ May this Advent and Christmas season help us not only to recognize our lowliness, but also to respond with “abiding joy” to the echoes of the angel's words: Do not be afraid, for we have found favor with God.

i <http://www.philamuseum.org/education/post-aa2.shtml>.

ii Jan Richardson, <http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/17/this-luminous-darkness-searching-for-solace-in-advent-and-christmas/>.

iii <http://momastery.com/blog/2015/12/18/saving-lives/>.