

“The Other Annunciation”
Matthew 1:18-25
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

When we went to Israel three years ago, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had never been to the Holy Land before, so I wondered what effect it would have on me. I would be going to the same places where Jesus had been. I would be standing on the place where David and Solomon had walked, where Abraham and Sarah had pitched their tent. What would I feel? Would it be a spiritual experience? Would I know that I was standing on holy ground? For most of the time I have to admit that I didn't. It was a wonderful trip, and for someone like me who is intrigued by history, especially Biblical history, it is a once in a lifetime experience. But when we walked through Jerusalem, the city where David and Solomon had been kings, I was overwhelmed by the shopkeepers selling every kind of souvenir under the sun. When we went to the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and went into the church that is supposed to stand over the spot where Jesus was born, I was thinking how weird it was to have a large, green, artificial Christmas tree outside the church in this desert climate.

But it was different when we went to Nazareth. Nazareth, a small city on the side of a hill. Nazareth, the city where Jesus had grown up, where he lived longer than anywhere else. Nazareth, where he learned to be a carpenter like Joseph, where he lived with his brothers and sisters until he heard the call of God, leading him away from his boyhood home, taking him to the river Jordan to a meeting with his cousin John after which nothing would be the same. I was thinking all these things about Nazareth but until we arrived, it had slipped my mind that Nazareth was also the city of the Annunciation. It was here that the angel Gabriel appeared to a young woman named Mary and announced that she would give birth to a holy child who was coming to save all people.

Of course there is a church of the Annunciation, built over the spot where tradition says that the angel appeared to Mary. But before we went, I hadn't realized that there were two churches of the Annunciation. Two because there are two different traditions of where the angel spoke to Mary.

According to Orthodox tradition, Gabriel came to speak to Mary when she went out to the village well to get water, and so there is a church built over the top of the village well. But according to Catholic tradition, the angel appeared to Mary when she was alone at home, and so the Catholic Church of the Annunciation is built over the place where tradition says Mary lived with her parents. Which one is right? No one really knows, but although the Orthodox church was interesting historically, I didn't feel anything spiritually until I went into the Catholic Church of the Annunciation. For the first time in the Holy Land, I felt like I had been hit over the head. I walked down the steps to where the site was supposed to be, the site where Gabriel had told Mary what was about to happen to her, and tears were coming to my eyes. What was this? I'm not Catholic. I don't have any special affinity for Mary. But as I walked up to the gate that separated the public from that holy site, I dropped down on my knees because I felt like this was a holy place. There was something about this spot, that once upon a time an angel had stood here and made an announcement to a young woman and she said yes. I walked out of there overwhelmed. Somehow I had a spiritual connection to that place.

It wasn't until much later, as I was thinking about the biblical story that it occurred to me that there was another annunciation. Not the Orthodox annunciation at the village well, but instead the story that Matthew tells. Luke has the Christmas story that is most familiar to us. The angel comes and appears to Mary, then Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth and find it is too crowded and there is no place for them to stay so they stay in a stable. Then angels appear to shepherds who are out in the field and tell them about the birth. But Matthew tells a different story. In Matthew the angel appears not to Mary, but to Joseph. Mary isn't mentioned much at all. So where's the big church of the Annunciation to Joseph? Actually there isn't one. There's a Church of St. Joseph that is built just to the side of the Catholic Church of the Annunciation, but it is built over the traditional site of Joseph's workshop. But where did the angel appear to him? Where is the spot where God called him? We don't know. Because there was no place, not really. Because God appeared to him in a dream. He is not wide awake in his workshop or even at prayer. There is no burning bush or parting of the clouds,

there is just a dream. How easy would it have been to just dismiss this dream? Mary is pregnant after all and he knows that the baby is not his. But he is a kind man and so he wants to do the right thing but do it quietly. But before he does anything he has a dream. An angel appears to him in a dream telling him not to worry. When he wakes up he takes it seriously. That's what I find so amazing. How many of us take our dreams seriously? How many of us even remember them ten minutes after we wake up? How easy would it have been for Joseph to dismiss his dream as merely wishful thinking. But the dream was enough for Joseph. Really? He changes his life based on a dream? He really believes that God has spoken to him because he dreams of an angel?

Is that how God speaks to us? Joseph must have wanted to hear something from God, because he was in quite a situation.

A word about first-century Jewish marriage may help explain what I mean. Various texts render this passage differently. The NRSV describes Mary and Joseph as “engaged.” The NIV describes them as “pledged” to be married, while the KJV says Joseph was “espoused” to Mary. No matter how you render it, however, it’s important to note that the bond between Mary and Joseph at this time was contractual, not merely social, as would be the case when talking about “engagement” in our day. That is, espousal/betrothal/engagement constituted the legal contract and pledge of marriage. The wedding itself was the time when the bride and groom were accompanied by friends and feasting to celebrate the occasion of actually joining their households.

For all intents and purposes, then, Mary and Joseph were married but had not yet moved in with each other or consummated their union. Hence the turmoil created by discovering that Mary was pregnant. It could, as far as Joseph was concerned, mean only one thing: that his espoused wife had been unfaithful. And this is why Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man -- he lives according to the law. And so, wanting out of what he believes is an unfaithful union, he has two options -- public stoning or divorce. He opts for the latter course, not wishing, as Matthew describes, to expose her to public disgrace and,

presumably, punishment.¹

And so when he has this dream, he believes. How extraordinary. But also how ordinary. Because doesn't God come to us in ordinary ways? We all dream, we see, we hear, we touch, and maybe those are ways that God speak to us as well. As the poet David Whyte says, for most of us “the call will not come so grandly, so biblically, but intimately, in the face of the one you know you have to love.”

The miracle of Christmas, the miracle of the Incarnation is that that God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people, and that God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death *and* rebirth as the children of God.

¹ Lose, David. *WorkingPreacher.org*. December 17, 2013.