

A couple weeks ago, I was having a conversation with someone in the profession of taking care of others. Our discussion revolved around the topic that I spoke to all of you about last week, the trauma that so many people seem to be suffering now. After discussing how, or even if, we might be able to assist a certain individual who was struggling immensely, the person said to me, "it's days like this that make me wish I was still in sales."

I admitted to that person that I had the exact same thought the day before. O, for the good old days, when bad decisions on my part only meant lost revenue, and did not directly injure a human being's mind or soul. But, of course, those of you who are in sales, or any other area of the business world, know that this nostalgic statement is a load of horse hockey. When I take a critical view of the days before my ordination, I realize that I was just as responsible for other people's lives then as I am now. In my last position before entering seminary, I knew that if I did not bring home the business, a couple dozen people were going to lose their job. No matter what our profession, we are always responsible for the well being of others. The problem comes when we make believe that this is not the case, when we are able to convince ourselves that what we do is only about me. No matter our job, or even if we are retired, when we change our focus from the other to ourselves, I believe that the breakdown of the kingdom of God begins. If I had to choose a single issue that causes the most emotional trauma for those who visit me on a regular basis, it would be that person's inability to see beyond themselves. When all we can do is focus on our own troubles, those troubles just seem to escalate

and get out of control.

Recently, we have begun to see the result of this ego-centric approach to life in the world around us. I talked about this a bit in the November newsletter. In his book, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith suggests that when each of us selfishly strives for our own individual good, the invisible hand of the market creates a greater good for all of us. I personally believe that it is this theory that has placed us in the economic turmoil in which we presently exist. As the “me generation” has taken over the workplace, we have seen what happens when people really do strive only for individual success, and it is not a pretty sight.

When I was in the business world, we had a mantra that represented this worldview. It was an acronym. CYA. Cover yourself. “No matter what you do, no matter how you do it,” I was told time and time again, “make sure that you always cover yourself. When everything is going to hell in a ham basket, make sure that you can prove that you had nothing to do with it. Be certain that you can prove, in writing, that you did not do it. Forget the company good, forget the good of your colleagues, forget the good of your employees, forget the customer. When push comes to shove, cover yourself. It is this approach to life that I believe is the central factor behind the collapse of our banks, insurance companies, and car manufacturers. Even more importantly, it is this inward focus that has created so much of our emotional and spiritual suffering.

I will also confess that I played right into this agenda. I told the people who reported to me the exact same thing. I told myself then, that what I was doing was the ethical approach. I told those employees that I would put my own job on the line for

them, as long as they could prove to me, with backup documentation, that they had covered themselves.

Speaking from experience, such an approach does little to successfully grow a company or a soul. Not only does it eat out the insides of a corporation, it also eats away at you. Such an individual approach to life, most often does damage to the wider community. But even more importantly, I would suggest that an individual approach to life can never leads us to God.

I find the Bible saturated with stories of those who failed or created hardship because they dwelled on themselves or their own situation and were not able to see the wider picture. But never is this more apparent to me than in today's Gospel. I hear Mary's words today as a treatise on how we are to view the world and how we are to respond to what happens to us. And I believe that if we could do so, we would bring about the very beautiful world that she describes in today's Psalm.

I think it is much easier to see what is happening in today's Annunciation, when we compare it with the other Annunciation story that immediately precedes it in the Gospel of Luke.

Here we have two very similar accounts of an angel coming to visit a human being. First Gabriel comes to visit the high priest Zechariah, and inform him that his apparently barren wife Elizabeth is going to have a baby. Then six months later, Gabriel is back to speak to Mary with a similar message. When we hear these stories today, in our post-Enlightenment mindset, we tend to get caught up in this angel part, don't we? We are immediately taken aback by the image of a heavenly being, and we are not sure

quite what to do with that. Well, my advice to all of you this morning is...get over it. Get out of your rational brains and stop being so ridiculously literal for a moment so that you may hear the very important message here. After all, remember that angel stories are a dime a dozen in the Biblical text. Every few pages, another one appears to someone. Obviously then, that is not the critical part of the story for the author. The angel Gabriel is a vehicle, the standard vehicle used in antiquity, to telegraph to us that something very important is about to happen.

The story of the angel's visit to Zechariah to announce his wife's pregnancy and his subsequent visit to Mary in today's Gospel, follows the pattern of those earlier visits in the Hebrew text. When we hear that an angel has come, we are supposed to think about Sara and Abraham and so many others. It is code for us that a revelation is about to occur.

In the case of these two Annunciation stories, the details are so similar that they seem to beg us to compare them with one another. In both situations, the angel announces a pregnancy that we, and the people who first heard it, understand to be physically impossible. Elizabeth is well past child bearing age and Mary, as we were told Tuesday night in the poetically naive language of the King James translation, "has never known a man."

Both Zechariah and Mary seem to have similar emotional reactions to this bizarre and astounding news. They are described as being afraid or even terrified. The similarities continue as the angel tells both of them to not be afraid. It is only at this point that we detect a difference in the two Annunciation stories. At first, Zechariah and

Mary's responses to the angel seem kind of similar too. But they are actually quite different. First, Zechariah. Does anyone remember what Zechariah says when the angel gives him the news that his post-menopausal wife is going to conceive? "How will I know," he says, "that this is so?" Zechariah's question is not about the miracle, or his wife or the baby. It is about him. "How will I know that this is so?" In other words, Zechariah wants proof. He wants a way to cover himself. He wants Gabriel to give him documentation about this miracle so that he can prove to his parishioners that he is not crazy. Remember that Zechariah is the high priest, so he has a reputation to consider. He knows that his congregation is going to think he has just broke into the sacramental wine if he goes out and tells them his wife is pregnant. He must have some proof that what this angel says is not a bunch of bull hockey. His first concern in this revelatory moment is not about what this event means in the grand scheme of things, but rather his need for an external authority so that he can demonstrate to the world that he has not gone wacko. "How will I know that this is so?"

Now let us look at Mary's reaction in today's Gospel. First of all, let us remember that Mary is going to be in real personal trouble if what this angel says is true. Unlike Zechariah, she is the one that will be directly affected by this annunciation and it is not just her job that will be on the line. Her life will be in jeopardy. Remember that in the first century, stoning was a sanctioned action to take against women who had intercourse outside of marriage. Beyond that, she lives in a culture where women and children have no rights, and guess what, she fits both categories. Even if this happened today, imagine parents, how you might react if your teenage daughter came home this

evening and announcing what Mary will be telling her parents. Not only will her reputation be ruined forever, but she will be left totally unprotected in that society. Zechariah loses his name. Mary loses everything, perhaps even her life. Despite all this, what does she say in response to the angel? “How can this be?” Mary does not ask anything about how she will survive such an event, but rather she wants to see the big picture. “How is it possible for this event to take place when I know enough about the laws of science to understand that this is physically impossible?” Unlike Zechariah, her question is full of wonder for what this will mean to the world, not for her. Her curiosity is about the event itself, this inbreaking of God into the world.

It is interesting that as with Zechariah, the angel Gabriel offers no proof to Mary either. Instead of actually answering Mary’s question, and explaining how such an unnatural event could occur, he completely dodges the question, offering some extremely vague, very unscientific explanation. “O well, I don’t know exactly how it works, the Holy Spirit will just kind of...overshadow you.” God, apparently does not give any of us receipts. God offers no way for any of us to cover ourselves.

All of you know that I think it is critical that we bring science and religion together and that we approach our faith with solid reason. But if we think God is going to give us a way to prove our faith to others, then we have not heard the lesson of the Annunciation. Annunciations, or any other form of revelation, cannot be proven. Never will we be able to ontologically prove any of this. Some things are just beyond words. That is the problem that I face Wednesday night and Thursday. What in the world can you say when the Word becomes flesh? Like Zechariah and Mary, all of us need to

decide whether or not we are going to accept what Christmas really means, or not.

While there is no difference between the lack of proof Gabriel offers to Zechariah or Mary, there is a huge difference between how he responds to them. The self-concerned Zechariah gets struck dumb for nine months. He is going to have to go through the entire pregnancy with no way to cover himself at all. And Mary? She becomes the mother of an entire religious tradition that we continue to embrace 2000 years later. Look at what happens if we can only stop focusing on ourselves and instead look at how we can bring the light to others.

That is not an easy thing to do, of course. It puts us in jeopardy when we do not cover ourselves, just like it did Mary. But beloved, if we are going to experience the true wonder of Christmas, what incarnation really means, we must expose ourselves to the danger of a world that thinks we are nuts. We need to go out on that proverbial limb and respond just like Mary.

She, like us, had no idea what Gabriel was talking about when he said the Holy Spirit would overshadow her. She knew darn well though, what was in store for her in a world where she would be judged and excluded. But she also saw the big picture. She saw what this meant for the world. So she said, okay, I'll do it. "Let it be with me according to your word."

That, beloved, is what it means to accept Christmas in our hearts. Let go of ourselves, let go of our fear of losing our position or our status or our safety and say to God, okay, I'm ready. I'm ready because I know what this is going to mean for others. "So let it be with me according to your word. Bring it on, God."

Of course, there remains that little matter of stoning. Being Mary means that people are going to be upset with you. They are going to write things about you in the newspaper. They are going to be upset when you rattle their theological comfort zone. Even people you love are going to be upset when you have no proof from God that you are right about this. But Mary shows us that we must march ahead without that proof, because we know what is at stake.

That is the challenge of Christmas. Are you willing to believe in a God that would become human, even though we have zero proof? Are you willing to forget about yourself and think about the world? If so, then it is time. It is time for Christmas to really happen. Bring it on God. Let it be with us according to your word. Amen.