

ANNUNCIATION 2017

By Sister Linda Clare, CSJB

“Do you want the good news first or the bad news”? “Don’t get mad at me if I tell you this”! “I know you don’t want to hear this but...”

All familiar opening lines - but none that we like to hear. They raise the anxiety level and block listening to what comes next – being so caught up in surprise that we can be deaf to what is being said. I have never had someone approach me with “Fear not” or “Don’t be afraid” and I’m relieved I have not.

Fear and reluctance come together after such a preamble. Fear can keep us from experimenting, trying new things, being adventurous, stepping off the edge. What do we miss through fear?

Recently in FDD one of the writers expressed how fear had shaped her life. The author tried to be safe rather than sorry and as a result missed out on many adventures. Fear kept her as a prisoner of her limitations or at least what she perceived as her limitations. She came to realize that her fears stemmed from a lack of control – the ability to throw common sense to the wind and let go. I know I had to let common sense and control go when I came here. The call made no sense to me but the call exceeded my hesitation.

Now put yourself in Mary’s shoes. Are you the medieval Mary showing little emotion at the appearance of Gabriel flying in through your window? Maybe angels flying through windows was more common in her day but I have trouble with some of the portrayals of her composure. She must have had an incredible ability to accept unusual and unexpected situations to remain so unconcerned.

Before Gabriel even opened his mouth, the very act of his appearing should have been enough to make her look up from her book and register some sort of surprise. In some paintings she does not and can seem rather laid back about the whole thing. Yes, there are paintings in which Mary extends her hand to keep Gabriel at bay or backs up to distance herself or places her hand on her chest to calm a beating heart.

Recently I read that in most depictions of the Annunciation, there is no contact between Mary and Gabriel and except for one painting I found that to be true. Some of the contemporary art has changed that and I found one painting where Gabriel is comforting Mary by sheltering her in his wing. But for this momentous occasion they are generally depicted at a distance from each other.

In the New Testament Gabriel only appears twice – once to Zechariah, where he identifies himself as an angel, and then to Mary, where he is named by Luke. His spiritual presence however is not limited to those visits. He is mentioned in Daniel, Ezekiel and Enoch. Gabriel is held in high regard in Jewish Kabbalah where he is portrayed as working with Michael in God's court. He is not to be prayed to since only God can answer prayers and his role is as God's agent.

In the Orthodox tradition Gabriel still has his own feast day but in the Catholic and Anglican Church he shares the day with Michael in September. In one interesting note, the church of Latter Day Saints believes Gabriel lived a mortal life as Noah. They are considered to be one being, with Noah as his mortal name and Gabriel as his heavenly one. In Muslim belief, God revealed the Quran to the prophet Muhammed through the angel Gabriel.

With his revelations and his role as God's messenger, it is no surprise that he is the patron saint of messengers, telecommunication workers, radio broadcasters, clerics, postal workers, diplomats and stamp collectors.

The tasks Gabriel is assigned can sometimes seem impossible. In the book "Annunciation" there is one scenario where a modern Gabriel is find a virgin in Miami and to deliver God's message to her - Gabriel seriously doubts that this task can be completed. But.... You will need to read it for yourself to see how it turns out.

Frederick Buechner reflects on Gabriel's visit to Mary as follows – the angel was struck by her youth, a child hardly old enough to have a child but he delivered the message as instructed. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come. He told her not to be afraid. As he said it he hoped she would not notice that beneath his great

golden wings he was himself trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.

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In the picture before you, Mary's face says it all – there is no complacency here, no hidden emotions, no disguised feelings. Let us now go back a moment to before she awakes and let us hear Gabriel's thoughts.....

“The moment before everything”

To get to you,
I travelled light years through cosmic storms and dust,

Only to find you sleeping on your simple cot.
Stepping back, I folded quietly, my gray, ragged wings.

I could see why he chose you, the glow of your pure breath.

Light filled the small room, tracing on the wall a child's profile.

Tired and tall, I stood by the window, waiting.

I didn't mean to frighten you, just wanted to keep looking.

I wanted this moment to last longer – the rare fork in the road of which very few humans are aware, but angels always see.

I wanted to breathe in your innocent air,

Look at your soft, surrendered hands, your eyelids beating inside a dream,

Another second, another one,

Before I told you the news.



Image: The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner - 1890's.