

**20 December 2020, Advent 4**  
**Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Luke 1:26-38**  
**On the road to Revelation**  
**First Mennonite Church**

Her name was Mary. She was an ordinary young Jewish woman. She lived in Nazareth, a small, insignificant agricultural village, home to only about 400 other



people. Like most of the people in Nazareth, Mary and her family were peasant farmers who didn't have a lot of financial resources. Mary was engaged to Joseph, something that was arranged by her and Joseph's parents, probably when Mary was only a child. Hers was a simple, humble existence, and as she anticipated her marriage to Joseph, she anticipated a simple, humble future.

Though she will soon be married and leave her family, Mary is still a very young woman. She's just barely past puberty, and yet she finds herself on the cusp of adulthood. She has no grand dreams of what she will do or what she will be when she grows up. As a young peasant Jewish woman, she knows that she will simply shift from living in and tending to her father's household to living in and tending to her husband's. She's already accustomed to the limits that traditional Jewish culture places on her. She has grown up submitting to her father's wishes, and she knows that after marriage, she will submit to her husband's. As the property of a male-dominated household, she knows not to speak with strangers, especially other men, unless she's accompanied by her husband or father. She's accustomed to having no power or voice in Jewish religious or legal spheres.

But then one ordinary day in Mary's ordinary life an angel of the Lord appears to her, and she is perplexed. Some Bible translations use the word, terrified. Mary was perplexed/terrified, not by the appearance of the angel, but by the angel's greeting—

the angel calls her **favoured one**. What do you make of that? How can she in any way be considered favoured? What is it about her life that is favoured by this unexpected angelic visitor?

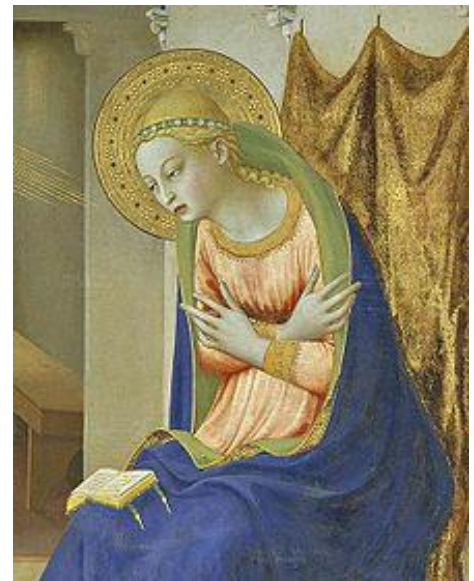
This is the way the angel greets her. The angel arrives on a completely ordinary day, potentially bringing news that will change her life forever. In the 1420s, Giovanni da Fiesole put his interpretation of this visit on canvas. The painting is called,



Annunciation. As you can see, the angel and Mary are painted with the kind of pastel pink and blue you might see in a nursery awaiting a newborn. The painting is divided in half by Corinthian column. On one half is the bowed figure of the angel with the coloured wings and arms folded around his chest. On the other half is Mary in a similar gesture, the artist symbol of submission

to God's will.

The artist has captured that moment when the angel Gabriel announced Earth shaking news to Mary—that she will conceive and give birth to a son who will be named Jesus. What will Mary do with this information? How will she respond to the promise of being the mother of the Most-High God? How will she respond to the promise that she will be the mother of a baby who will be given the throne of David, the mother of a baby who will reign over Jacob's descendants, and whose kingdom will never end? Will Mary accept the calling to be the messiah's mother? The angel awaits her response.



In the painting there is naturally no movement. Everything is still. No flutter in the angel's wings. Not one eye blinks. The moment is frozen in time. It's as if the earth has stopped spinning on its axis; as if time itself is hinged on the answer of Mary. The angel's announcement hangs in the still air: what's her response? In this motionless moment, heaven and earth hold their breath.

Long ago, in the Ur of the Chaldeans, heaven and earth also held their breath. An old couple, Abraham and Sarah, pondered their current existence and what the future would hold for them. Their concerns were three-fold:

- Where could they graze their cattle and sheep when they didn't have any land?
- Who will inherit their possessions and carry on the family name?
- Why didn't they have a child, specifically a male heir?

Then one ordinary day, God came to Abraham and said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing." Like angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary, this one to Abraham and Sarah hangs in the still air: what's their response? In this motionless moment, heaven and earth hold their breath.

Today, we are on the road to revelation. Revelation sounds complicated, but it's pretty simple. The word revelation means to unveil something, to uncover something. Something that is unknown, becomes known.

These days, when someone is going to have a baby, people are often curious to know whether the baby will be a girl or boy. A week or so ago, my spouse was in a meeting with some of her colleagues. One of them is pregnant. During the meeting her colleague **revealed** that the baby in her womb was a boy. This was a virtual "reveal party!" This is an example of revelation.



As we are getting closer to Christmas, there is much talk about Christmas gifts. The gift is a box, and it's wrapped. You don't know what's inside—it could be almost anything—a calculator, a phone, a flower. You can pick the gift up, smell it, shake it, feel its weight. But you

won't know what the gift is until you actually take off the wrapping paper and open it up. It's only after you open it, will you know what you received. Revelation is like this. The opposite is also true. If you never open the gift, you will never know what the gift is.



The Covid-19 public health crisis has revealed many things about us. At the start of the lockdown in March, there were many generous people who offered to buy groceries for those who couldn't get to the grocery store. In Greystone Heights, folks there clanged and banged their pots

and pans in appreciation for front-line workers. They also collected donations for the Food Bank. This woman in Italy, serenaded her neighbourhood with music from her balcony. A gift of hope, helping her neighbours with their mental health.



The pandemic also revealed how fragile the Canadian economy is to major shocks. Millions of Canadians were working in March, and then suddenly many lost jobs or had their hours reduced. Kathi and I were the fortunate. We shifted, pivoted to working in a different way. According to Statistics Canada, the federal government reported that more than 8.1 million Canadians received the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to supplement their lost income during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> That was about 1 in 5 Canadians. What about SK? According to Statistics Canada, around 559,800 people were employed in the province in March.<sup>2</sup> Federal government data shows that as of June 28, it has received more than 214,000 unique CERB applications from Saskatchewan. That accounts for around **38 per cent** of the province's entire workforce.<sup>3</sup> 38%. Can you imagine the kind of economic crisis, the social upheaval we would have experienced if 38% of SK's workforce hadn't received anything? It boggles my mind to think about that!

Revelation. It means to unveil something, to uncover something. Something that is unknown, becomes known.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/claims-report.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/claims-report.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/7160515/saskatchewan-workforce-cerb-coronavirus/>

How did Abraham and Sarah respond? The story tells us that even though they had no idea how these promises would work out, they venture forth anyway.

How does Mary respond to the angel? Mary does not break out in a belly laugh, like Sarah did at the idea of giving birth to a nation while being old enough to live in a senior's care home. Like Abraham and Sarah who were concerned with land, whom to leave their possessions to, and no son, Mary is also concerned about practical issues. "Just how is this going to happen, Mr Gabriel, sir? You aren't a gynaecologist! Look at me? Though I'm engaged to Joseph, the final step of our marriage hasn't happened yet. I'm still living under my father's house, haven't moved into my husband's house. So, I'm still a virgin!" Mary is no naive teenager. She knows about the birds and the bees, the facts of life.

What the angel tells her must have sounded just as incredible to Mary as did Sarah's news of giving birth in a geriatric ward. The angel tells her that her child will be born through the Holy Spirit. Might the angel Gabriel have overheard what the angel of the Lord said to a giggling Sarah near the oak tree so long ago? The final words of these two angels are practically the same, however: **nothing will be impossible with God** (Genesis 18:14; Luke 1:37).

With his other worldly message spoken, the angel Gabriel awaits Mary's response to God's message.

The biblical story is a story of revelation—of God coming into human history with a promise of life and inviting us to respond by taking that small step of faith into the unknown.

For Abraham and Sarah, they came to know that God is Faithful, that God loves them, and that God keeps promises because they responded to God's promise. They were protected during their wanderings, they received a son even in their old age, and they were able to buy a tiny piece of land. Through these experiences, they learned something about God. God became known to them through revelation.

Later, the Hebrews discovered that God actually cared for the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden. As captives in the land of Egypt, their only experience of god were the gods of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Those gods were always on the side of the powerful and mighty kings. But in the Exodus, the Hebrew people discovered that

God cares for the poor and the weak because God freed them from bondage. Revelation.

Later, when Israel gathered for worship, they declared with the Psalmist: *I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens* (Psalm 89:2).

Mary was at first, greatly perplexed/troubled by the words of the angel who told her she would bear a son. Though the angel Gabriel called Mary a favoured one she didn't feel favoured, at least, not at first. But Mary knew enough of the real, living God of Israel, that a message from God might be something to be perplexed/terrified about. The angel came to tell her that she had been selected by God to change the whole world through the Advent of the Messiah. Young, poor Mary was so alert, so spiritually prepared to recognize this encounter as a message from God that she responded with words from an old Beatles song—Let Let it be. *Here am I, a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.*

As Christians, we have seen in the person of Jesus a God who is stronger than the grave, mightier than all the forces of darkness. We've experienced this through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is revelation.

The bulletin cover I chose for this week is of a cloud-shrouded bridge in San Francisco. I've been on that road several times over the years. When you look at it, you see the road at the bottom of the photo, but then it disappears into the clouds. Does the road continue or does it suddenly end at a sheer cliff? If you've never driven that road before, would you drive it? You may believe that the road continues into the clouds, but you **don't know** that. The only way to find out is to actually drive into the cloud. In other words, **you have to literally place your life on the promise that the road will continue.** Once you have driven across, then you know for a fact that it does continue. You have experienced it to be true. But, if you had not got into your vehicle, responded to the promise, and drove across, then you would have never known whether the promise was true.

This is revelation. As we continue to prepare the coming of God into the world this week, let's be open to seeing and experiencing God in the most unexpected places. As you visit with people on the phone or via computer screen, or simply take in the news and current events, imagine how God might be moving through people that the rest of the world would easily discount.

When you are praying this week, notice and name the parts of your life that you are insecure or unhappy about and invite God to birth something new.

Even though Mary was a poor, unwed teenager from Nazareth, she was spiritually prepared to see, listen and respond in obedience to the angel's announcement that she would bear a child who would change the world.

So today, on the threshold of the incarnation, let us go to the stable. Let us welcome the one who is born among us, the one who intends to take us where we have never been, and to make us people we could not be on our own.

God is speaking to us, inviting us on new roads. God's invitation hangs in the still air: what's our response? In this motionless moment, heaven and earth hold their breath. Let us go to the stable, let us worship him, and then let us take that step into the unknown. Amen.