

***GOD'S
SURPRISING
ADVENT***

***FOUR ADVENT MEDITATIONS
FOR RCL YEAR B***

CRAIG THOMPSON

ILLUMINATING FAITH

About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith.

Craig Thompson is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, presently placed with the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne.

© 2020 Craig Thompson and the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist. Permission is granted to print and distribute this material in its present form for non-commercial purposes.

© Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

GOD'S SURPRISING ADVENT

FOUR ADVENT STUDIES FOR RCL YEAR B

These studies are intended for use as Advent studies in the 'Year B' cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). They focus on the first reading in the selection for each week, which are taken from Isaiah. On Advent 4, one of the RCL options around the birth of Jesus from Luke's gospel is selected. While they are prepared as Advent studies, they can of course be used at any time: our need to hear of God's approach is not confined to December!

The studies are intended for use as a read-and-discuss study series. The *Questions for Reflection* are guides only; the discussion can follow the interests of the group. The *Response* suggested at the end of each study might be undertaken prior to gathering for discussion as part of individuals' preparation for the group, or as a group at the end of the discussion.

The content of the studies is in the form of a meditation; they were originally sermons (in fact, preachers would be welcome simply to preach them). If you would like more exegetical information on the focus texts for each study and don't have commentaries to hand, the free online materials of Howard Wallace (on Isaiah) and Bill Loader (on Luke) are as good a resource as any. The links for the first three studies are

Advent 1B [Isaiah 64:1-9](#)

Advent 2B [Isaiah 40:1-11](#)

Advent 3B [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

(or look up 'Year B' on Wallace's web site: hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au)

The link for study 4 is [Luke 1.26-38](#), (or find it at wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html)

Contents

1. Hope and Prayer	1
2. God is Coming. And it is the End of You.	5
3. The God who brings Death and Life	9
4. Mary: The Freedom of the Servant.....	13

1. HOPE AND PRAYER

Advent 1B

Isaiah 64.1-9 | Psalm 80.1-7,17-19 | 1 Corinthians 1.3-9 | Mark 13.24-37

Isaiah 64.1-9

¹ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴ From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

⁵ You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷ There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.

Now consider, we are all your people.

Every day we read, we hear, something new in the news: some new political furore, the unprecedented weather event, the surprise that *he* is suddenly outed as an abuser, or that *she* was abused, the economic bubble or burst, the bomb blast.

Yet, in this way, so also is the news pretty much always the same. There is a persistent staleness about the particular newness of the news. The same *kinds* of things keep happening, if in ever-changing form. And we respond to them in the same kinds of ways. Investigative commissions, witch hunts, further regulation, lower (or higher) taxes, better medication, more surveillance. We are ever active, ever responding, although always with the same kind of response because it is the same kinds of things to which we are reacting.

We can ‘dress’ this experience with the colourful language of Isaiah’s lament in our text: ‘we have become like one who is unclean’. The sense of the text is almost certainly of the ritual uncleanliness described in the religious law, but it remains the case, even in a secular context, that we are unable to wash ourselves of the things which cling to us, which require constant scrubbing, which keep us busy and distracted and weary.

It is out of this experience that there springs the extraordinary lament which opens our text from Isaiah: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’. For what else could heal us?

In the text, this bidding springs from a recollection of the past, although not in any nostalgic sense. It is not that there was a golden age, a ‘good old days’ to which they long to return. Nostalgia is delusional escapism, of which the Scriptures can never be accused. Longing for yesterday gets us nowhere because it forgets that, even if things felt better back then, that ‘then’ is what delivered us the present in which we now live, whether the present of the church or of society more generally. The past for which we might long was the seed of what we now long to escape.

The prophet recalls instead God’s working of ‘awesome things *we did not expect*’. What has been lost is not the golden past, but the unexpectedness of God. It is only in the presence and action of this one that the world breaks out of the cycles of stale newness.

And so what is required is not more manipulation of the world around us, but prayer such as we hear in the prophet here. What we seek is something which cannot be rightly expected, and so something we don’t know how to tease into reality. Hope is not concerned with what we can see or touch or even imagine, for these are the very things which bind us. Hope springs from the unexpectedly new, the unseen, the unknown.

The text dresses with this reality in language we scarcely dare entertain today, convinced as we are of God’s boundless love and, so, of the easy access we have to God. But we must take seriously the prophet’s declaration that God has ‘hidden’ Godself: ‘for you have hidden your face from us.’

Whatever else this means, it means that prayer is not a kind of spiritual ‘technology:’ not a thing we need to do, in just the right kind of way with just the right words and condition of heart, in order to get God to act as we would like. The RCL gospel reading appointed to accompany this Isaiah text on the first Sunday of Advent (Year A) declares that ‘about that day or hour, no one knows’, and so makes the same point: God cannot be calculated. The hiddenness of God – that God has hidden Godself – is God’s inaccessibility on any terms other than God’s own.

If this is the case, then what we need for the radically new and truly refreshing is not better science, more open hearts or gentler politics. None of these should be scoffed at, but they are appeals to variations in the quantity of what we think we have or need. The prayer of Isaiah is a prayer for something of a different quality.

And this different quality is marked by a different method: a different orientation and expectation and so a different way of being. It is a humble waiting on God in the ‘fervent breath of prayer,’ as an old hymn puts it. As prayer, it is not inactive or passive. There is much we can do, not so much ‘in addition to prayer’ as giving body to our prayers. We do not pray ‘and’ act. Our prayers are surely actions, for in this way we mark before the world that we need more than we can say or do, and our actions are surely prayers, for in this way we show God how we desire things to be and seek more of it.

Advent is not about ‘waiting’ for God, as if at any other time of the year we are not waiting. It brings to the fore the character of our relationship with God as one of grace, in which things unexpected or unmerited are given, that we might live. This characterises all Christian existence as marked by hope, embodied in prayer and action. God has acted, and so we pray, and God acts, and we pray.

Let such prayer, then, mark the whole of our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

For what do we most pressingly need to pray today?

What might an expected answer to such prayer look like?

What actions might give body to these prayers

RESPONSE

Read together the psalm set in the RCL for to complete our focus text for this study (below), then finish with a time of prayer for each other.

Psalm 80.1-7,17-19

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!

- ³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
- ⁴ O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- ⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
- ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
- ...¹⁷ But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
- ¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
- ¹⁹ Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

2. GOD IS COMING. AND IT IS THE END OF YOU.

Advent 2B

Isaiah 40.1-11 | Psalm 85.1-2,8-13 | 2 Peter 3.8-15a | Mark 1.1-8

Isaiah 40.1-11

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'
⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,

and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

To those looking for peace comes the cry,

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.’

God is coming! Make the way straight! ‘Cry out!’

And what shall we cry?

‘All people are *grass*, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; *surely* the people are grass...’

The Old Testament prophets have a particular capacity to punch, square in the face, any easy forgiveness or cheap attempt to leap out of the world, as it is, into sentimental notions of paradise on earth or of eternal life! Isaiah declares: God is coming. And No One. Gets Out. Alive. Comfort, O comfort my people...

How do we respond to this? Horror, revulsion or terror would make sense to any normal person who took it seriously. But what about the people gather to read texts like these each year in the approach to Christmas? Does this horrify, terrify us as well? Are *we* ‘normal’?

The *abnormality* to which we are called as conspirators with Isaiah and disciples of Jesus is that we not be horrified here. Rather, we are to find ourselves set free with the realisation that we are not divine. That we are grass, that we are mortal, is the mark of our *creatureliness*.

We need, of course, to speak carefully. There is here no *exultation* in our mortality. It is not a thing to celebrate; it is just ‘a thing.’ ‘No one gets out alive’ is the *law*. It is, simply, the case. The function of law is to limit: only drive this fast; only drink this much; keep your hands to yourself; that far and no further. The law constrains, which is precisely what Isaiah declares here: you are constrained. You are flowers and grass, and will wither and fade.

We all *know* this, of course. What matters is the impact we allow the fact of our mortality to have. If our mortality is fundamentally offensive to us, then we labour to keep it at bay, to preserve ourselves as long as possible, to hold death at a distance by whatever power or influence we have. Life understood in these terms finds Isaiah’s mortal realism horrifying, terrifying, or repulsive. Who needs – or wants – to be reminded of the enemy when the work of our lives is to keep us hidden from that enemy for as long as possible? We see this in ourselves and in others, and we might characterise it as a *deathly* mortality. It knows only the law and its limits.

But Isaiah’s proclamation does not call us to this but, rather, to a *lively* mortality. This is a mortality – a *creatureliness* – which knows the limit and exults not in *it* but in the *freedom* which comes with it. This is the freedom not to *have* to survive, the freedom of not being *necessary*. The *gospel* in Isaiah’s proclamation is not simply that Israel’s ‘sins are taken away’.

The *content* of those sins was the drive to make ourselves necessary, the denial of death's final claim on us and of the possibility that we might cease to be. Isaiah's gospel is that when God comes that kind of striving and anxiety is no longer required.

A *deathly* mortality is reflected in the corresponding *deathly life*: a life lived at heart in fear of – or revulsion at – the God who defines us as creatures, as grass. This is a life which finds it insufficient to be in the *form* or image of God and grasps at more (see, for example, Genesis 3 and Philippians 2).

A *lively* mortality is one which would live life to its fullest. A lively mortality celebrates the approach of God because it is when God comes as Creator above, and beyond, and yet *for*, us that we come to ourselves, that we *become* true ourselves.

Here the law finds its *end* – its purpose: God being God, creature being creature, in the same moment.

In neither the lively nor the deathly experience of our death is that death any less real. All that matters is which way death's shadow falls.

If it falls towards us, on this side of our inevitable definition in death, then our life is lived in a valley of death's shadow. We live and die in a kind of twilight; aware of the hint of more but not able to do much more than light candles and fires against the encroaching gloom.

But if death's shadow falls away from us, on the *other* side of death, this means that death is obscure, that we cannot see what is beyond it, what it holds for us. This is to say that death is incomprehensible. And *this* is to say that *we* – who are mortal – do not yet know what we are. What it finally means to be a creature is still hidden from us, even if we walk now in the light. But we need no longer be jumping at the shadows.

This is the death – and the life – to which we are called, in all its incomprehensibility. And the word about all this is given in Isaiah for our comfort: when God comes, we *become* as we are created to be.

In the church, of course, we also hear rumours of resurrection, of death overcome and of life without end. At heart, this way of speaking is to say the same thing with a different emphasis or accent. Resurrection does not deny our death but only changes it; the 'only', however, is momentous: freedom from fear, life along straight and level pathways.

The gospel is that God is coming. And this will be the end of you. And a new beginning.

God comes that we might know that we are not God, that we are not *necessary* and do not need to try to be. More than merely necessary, we are *loved*, desired, by the God who created us in order that God might come to us, and we to God.

And God *will* come, and come, and come, and come... until we are finally – and only – God's own.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In what ways is it liberating to be reminded that we are not divine, are not 'necessary'?

How is fear of death manifest in our personal and wider community lives?

What does a 'lively mortality' look like for you?

RESPONSE

Read together the psalm set in the RCL for to complete our focus text for this study (below), then finish with a time of prayer for each other.

Psalm 85.1-2,8-13

¹ Lord, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.

Selah

...⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

3. THE GOD WHO BRINGS DEATH AND LIFE

Advent 3B

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11 | Psalm 126 or Luke 1.46b-55 | 1 Thess 5.16-24 | John 1.6-8, 19-28

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

¹ The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
...⁸ For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Good news to the oppressed, binding up of the broken-hearted, proclamation of liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners; a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of

mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; the garments of salvation, a robe of righteousness, a garland, jewels...

The word of promise in this language is surely extraordinary in the ears of those who have lived through hell. Isaiah proclaims a great reversal, a turning upside-down of the experience of the people of God – the return of God in their midst as blessing.

But what about those for whom the world is not horrific, for whom life's biggest challenge is along the lines of negotiating a shopping centre carpark a few days before Christmas or waiting out a kitchen renovation? What does Isaiah have to say to any whose life is largely devoid of oppression or ashes or unrighteousness? Because, for most of us in Western society– in and out of the church – life is mostly OK most of the time, and so Isaiah's proclamation comes to us like icing on what is already a pretty good cake.

One way of hearing Isaiah under these circumstances is to imagine that he speaks not to us, but as us: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me,' or us. The word to us becomes our own word and, going further, we take it upon ourselves not simply to speak of the coming of God but to be those who realise God's peace. We have received the Spirit, and we are to pay that forward, for others.

Certainly, those who 'have' are under a moral obligation to share and bless those who have not. Yet if this is all it is about, then God has nothing more to say to us who imagine ourselves already blessed. But *is* there a word of the Lord – a blessing, heart-raising word – for the relaxed and mostly comfortable?

The question of our redemption is not pressing today, either in the church or in society more generally. Certainly we are constantly working towards something, and something better than we what we presently know, but this kind of progress is not the business of Christian worship or faith. The heart of our confession is not the offer of a *nudge* from worse to bad, or bad to good, or good to better. We speak, rather, of life out of death, of the creation of something out of nothing. Christian faith is, at heart, concerned with miracles, with the impossible. For when God comes, what God brings is not only the kind of healing we think we need but also revelation of the full extent of that need, beyond our expectation. In the breadth of Isaiah's preaching God speaks such words of comfort as we read in worship each Advent, but also expresses divine rage and accusation against the people for things about themselves they would scarcely recognise or be aware of.

When God comes, it is always as life out of death, as creation out of nothing. This means that when God comes it is always with bad news as well as with the good, the good revealing the bad. The broken-hearted may not know, or have acknowledged, that indeed their hopes have been dashed; the captives do not know that they are imprisoned, the comfortable not know just how insecure they are.

Christians mark just this dynamic in their weekly worship. We call on God, whether we are feeling we need God or not. We hear that we are forgiven, often of things we had not imagined we were guilty. Perhaps quintessentially, we gather around a table at which is served a victim through whom salvation is somehow won.

All of this ‘works’, however, only to the extent that the bad comes with the good. If we speak of the coming of resurrection, we speak also about the coming of death. But we have to be careful here. The proclamation of resurrection is not for the dying but for the dead. We noted in the previous meditation that we all know that we are dying. This knowledge of our mortality, however, is not the question answered by resurrection. Resurrection *reveals* death – a death we do not yet know – it does not merely nudge us through what we already know. Resurrection doesn’t answer our sense for death because we have not yet asked the question well enough, despite our mourning and ashes, as real as they are. The resurrection with which the church is concerned is that which identifies who is dead, including us dead who are still walking.

This is enacted also in the Eucharist. The Eucharist ‘works’ only to the extent that we who receive the body and blood admit a culpability in its having been broken and spilt. There is no ‘nudge’ here into a better life by taking a spiritual medicine which treats some disease in us, and so which could be substituted for a generic brand which is not called ‘body’ and ‘blood’. The ritual *kills* in the accusation of our complicity in death, and *raises* in the creative grace of God. Death is but a means by which God can bless; the Eucharist is death and resurrection – Jesus’, and our own.

‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me,’ Isaiah proclaims, with the emphasis falling on the spirit, and not on the ‘me’. For it is the spirit of the Lord which creates and renews the face of the earth. This is the light John announced, which enlightens everyone (John 1.9), even those who do not yet know they are living in shadows. When God comes, the dark places appear and are flooded with light.

And the gospel is that God *is* coming.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are you too comfortable to hear the gospel?

What kind of bad news might come with the good news of the gospel?

How do we best respond to the bad news the light of the gospel might reveal to us?

RESPONSE

Read together the psalm set in the RCL for to complete our focus text for this study (below), then finish with a time of prayer for each other.

Psalm 126

¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."

³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

4. MARY: THE FREEDOM OF THE SERVANT

Advent 4B

Luke 1.26-38 | 2 Sam 7.1-11, 16 | Luke 1.46b-55 or Ps 89.1-4,19-26 | Rom 16.25-27

Luke 1.26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ 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.

The story of the birth of Jesus, as told in Matthew and in Luke, includes, of course, the statement that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary, a virgin. This is no small distraction to modern readers and, indeed, is such a distraction that most of the rest of the details of Jesus' birth are read almost without comment. And so, because we tend to focus on the problem of the means of conception, Mary herself gets short-shrift when we consider a reading like that this one – the Annunciation – perhaps particularly in Protestant circles. Mary is easily reduced to being somewhat instrumental in the story, in the sense of being a *mere* instrument: *someone* has to bear Jesus and it just happened to be *this* girl, Mary.

We will focus in this study, however, on the response of Mary to the extraordinary visit from Gabriel and the news he brings. In addition to the news of the extraordinary conception, at least two more things are striking in the story. The first is the recurrence of the word 'will'.

'...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... 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...'

The archangel even concludes with a somewhat unexpected, ‘For nothing *will* be impossible with God.’ (NRSV)

This little word is here simply a reference to the future, and not an insistent ‘you *will*’ do this and this, and be subject to that and that. ‘Will’ is here simply a statement of fact: this is what it going to happen. Gabriel does not need to insist that this is going to happen because the one who sent him has simply determined that this is going to be the case.

This being the case, the second striking thing here is Mary’s final remark, with which the encounter ends: ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’ or, to translate it a little more strongly, Here am I, the *slave* of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’. Here we meet in the story another offence to the modern mind. If the first offence is the account of the virginal conception, the second offence is the violation of Mary with the declaration that this is what is going to happen to her, followed by her seemingly weak acquiesce to this news.

John Lindley’s poem ‘Annunciation’ sees a *violation* of Mary’s will (and body) in Gabriel’s news and, in so doing, he identifies a fundamental problem we moderns might have with this story: that Mary says, *Yes*. For it does not seem to matter whether she says yes or not; Gabriel has already declared that this is what is going to happen. Mary’s role in God’s Next Big Thing has already been determined: you *will* conceive in your womb and bear a son. This, Lindley suggests, is a strange ‘gift that must be paid for’.

Mary’s situation is what we might properly call a ‘mysterious’ one – for she is both not free and free at the same time. She is not free because here God is sovereign and not she. But she is also free to declare herself servant, or slave, or else to do what Jonah did and kick and struggle all the way. It is possible, of course, to invoke a bit of pop psychology and to speculate that, since Mary herself was sure that what was declared would happen was indeed going to happen, it would be in her best interests simply to ‘go with the flow’ and not put up pointless resistance before an irresistible force, and that this is precisely what she did. But we would rightly find that to be a weak response on Mary’s part, for it is better to live a life raging against the machine than being reduced to a piece of flotsam tossed to and fro by the tide. Is such a rage not precisely what Jesus’ own in persisting on the path to the cross?

All of this, however, is pretty abstract if Mary’s situation is not also, in some way, also *our own* – if her being both free and not free at the same time, and making a choice in that situation, is not also possibly our own condition. Our offence at Mary’s apparent loss of freedom derives from our sense that we *are* free, that we are ultimately no one’s handmaid or servant or slave. If someone were to come to us and declare that ‘this is what is going to happen’, like it or not, the typical modern response would likely be great offence: surely something like this is undemocratic, un-American, or un-Australian. Surely I do not have to give in to *that*?

And yet, each year the silly season we call Christmas is telling in this connection. We are, of course, all ‘free’ in relation to the demands of Christmas, and yet somehow we also seem to be extraordinarily un-free. For it is Christmas, the angels tell us, and you will endeavour to meet with every person you know before December 25, for surely the world will end on Boxing Day.

You will eat too much, and drink too much, and endure the company of relatives you only see once a year, and for good reason. You will spend more money than you have, because this is what it means to be generous, and the economy desperately needs it. Because in fact the world will *not* end on Boxing Day you will gather in droves for the post-Christmas sales, for surely what you bought last Boxing Day is now in need of replacement. You will then desert the cities for holiday destinations and sit in traffic and wait in supermarket queues in usually sleepy seaside villages rather than in the city. And so on.

This is, perhaps, a cynical way of putting it but the cynicism is not the point. The point is that even if we object to Mary's exercise of her freedom in her willingness to be bound by what God says will happen, at this time of the year with its particular demands on us or any other 'normal' time and the demands it makes, we ourselves are as much addressed by the angels – or the demons – of our day with declarations of what is going to overshadow us, of what we are going to have to bear, and of what we will name it to be. You are a democracy, and so your politicians will do all they can to denigrate each other and ingratiate themselves with you who vote. You are a capitalist society, and so the invisible hand will be your salvation whether you are rich or poor. You are young, and so you will be society's great hope; you are not-so-young, and so you will be held responsible for the mess we are in.

Mary's response to the claim God has made on her life is '...let it be with me according to your word'. This is not what we say to those onerous demands made of us by the ghosts in the machines of our society and yet, for the most part, we continue to be *subject* to those demands, even as we value and proclaim our freedom. And so there is for us a continual tension – the desire to be free, but being subject to something which denies that freedom and so creates the dissonance of unfilled desires, in the very midst of the promise that we will be fulfilled. For this promise is no small part of our society: just acquire this or that, do this or that, and all will be fulfilled. And yet it is not. The problem is that these visions of the future are hollow, or shallow, or thin. They are not in accord with what we are and with what we need. And so, for all that they might promise, and for all the conviction with which we might say 'Yes', they do not deliver.

But what God speaks to Mary is different. God lays before her not one of a range of possibilities, but the only thing by which Mary will truly become herself. For when God calls – or promises – it is not an external thing which meets us as strangers to the one who calls, somehow added to what we already are. When God calls, he *creates* us, calls into being things which do not yet *properly* exist, calls to 'life' that which is 'dead'. When God addresses Mary through Gabriel the word is effectively, 'Mary, here you are.' And Mary says, 'Yes, there I am; let it be with me according to your word, let me *be* according to your word.'

By comparison, this dynamic is much more important than the question of whether or not Mary was a virgin. The impossibility of a virginal conception is just a sign for a deeper impossibility: that we might hear a call – a declaration of our future – which *offends* our very sense of self, and yet which in fact promises us our *true* selves quite simply because our own sense of self is wrong-headed. For we are the piecing-together of various calls and promises and hopes continually declared by the angels and demons of the world around us, which have only half made us and so have left us both satisfied that we have what we want, and yet still wanting.

What we see in Mary is someone who hears a call which defines her and to which she says Yes, not out of resignation but because the one who spoke the word could be trusted: here is a promise which will be delivered, the evidence of which is her very condition as a young girl who ought not to be conceiving a child.

Mary's response is the response of the disciple who hears of a coming healing, and agrees to be a part of the means by which it comes because she believes that, by the power of the one who calls her, she *can* be such a part.

Her response is the response God seeks of all of us, variously called and promised our own part in God's work, and so variously assured that we can fulfil that part:

the Holy Spirit *will* come upon you, and the power of the Most High *will* overshadow you, and you *will* be made holy, be reconceived, that you might take up your part in the unending kingdom of him whose own beginning was just like this, that he might become our end.

The God who calls us is faithful, and will do as God promises.

Let it, then, be with us according to God's word, that Advent and Christmas and all our seasons might be full and rich with the humanity for which we were created.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In what sense are we free and not free in this world?

An old hymn proposes, 'Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free'. How is this freedom different from the freedom widely sought in the world?

Consider the difference between 'freedom from' and 'freedom for'. How does this apply to Mary's response to God, and our own?

RESPONSE

Read together Mary's response to Gabriel's visit, set in the RCL for to complete our focus text for this study (below), then finish with a time of prayer for each other.

Luke 1.46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Also available

The covenanting God draws near

Rob Gotch

The Spirit in the Desert

Is God among us or not?

Howard Wallace

Reading the Creed Backwards

Craig Thompson

The Lord's Prayer – Prayer for those who can no longer pray

Bruce Barber

The Apostles' Creed

– A lively text in a world made strange

Bruce Barber

Intro to the New Testament [YALE UNIVERSITY]

Intro to the Hebrew Scriptures [YALE UNIVERSITY]

To be notified when new studies become available,
subscribe to our email list via the links on the web site address below.

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au

God's Surprising Advent – Version Date: October 2020