

ADVENT 4, December 21, 2014, Year B

"Let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

- I was talking with someone this week who spoke of a common experience. [Many of us feel down at this time of year.](#) The reasons are not hard to discern. We are in deepest winter darkness, today being the shortest day of the year. It seems *even darker* with no snow on the ground. Though Christmas lights are up everywhere, it's hard to avoid being affected by dreary gloom. We are also in a time when we're sensitive to remembered losses. Departed loved ones are missing from our holiday gatherings, and many relatives live far away. The special music now being played everywhere, doesn't really help, and we suspect our own mood is out of sync with those around us. [How, then, are we able to look up, when we find ourselves so prone to looking down?](#)
- This is how many of us experience these days before the holidays. We feel behind in our preparations, and not sure we're ready to project happiness, goodwill and festive cheer. If all this sounds familiar, you may be surprised by what I'll say next. [These feelings are perfect for Advent! This is what this season is all about!](#) A memorable quote from the prophet Isaiah, echoed by Matthew, sums it up: ["the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."](#)¹
- Thus it has ever been. For Isaiah and Matthew speak of what is universal, even if it's not universally recognized or named. Advent leading to Christmas, and the celebration of Hanukkah, help meet our essential needs. To ask [why](#), is to ask [about why are we drawn to light](#), both natural and metaphorical. Which then helps us realize we're more attuned to light because we start in darkness. And, that [we seek joy because we are uncomfortably familiar with its opposite.](#)
- From earliest times right up through John in the wilderness, [prophets spoke truth to their contemporaries.](#) Quite often, they pointed to the future. The whole purpose of *calling to account* institutions and leaders, in light of God's revelation, is to point to [a holy future](#)—to [what God will do in the days ahead.](#) It's also to disclose how God is *already at work* bringing about a divinely-intended future. The words of prophets and the visits of angels have a common

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message: [God is up to something! God has purpose for the future.](#) *What God is-now-up-to*, will change the world even though we have a hard time imagining it! And so, when we find ourselves looking down, we may be surprised by angels and prophets who point 'upwards,' to something greater.

- Luc-Olivier Merson's 1908 *Annunciation* may speak to this, and I have put a copy of it in your worship bulletin. Two things stand out right away ~ biblical figures portrayed in a 19th century European farm setting, and the way [Mary looks down, while an angel appears on a rooftop, pointing upwards.](#)
- Unlike many Annunciation paintings, Merson does not focus on the encounter between two personal beings. His *Annunciation* is not colored by the dynamics of male-female interaction, a theme that so absorbs our present culture, and implicit in some historical treatments of the moment. *Here we have a feminine or an androgynous angel, who instead of being face-to-face with Mary, hovers above another building. I think Merson depicts the moment just after the angel shares the news with Mary, and before she sings her magnificat.* Mary is wrapped in white, suggesting her purity, but also prefiguring the burial shrouds with which her son will be wrapped. Her gaze is focused on the unlikely stem of lilies she finds on the ground, outside a dark open doorway through which she emerges. [Both symbolize resurrection.](#) Doves grace the air in the foreground, a traditional way to suggest the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.
- Rather than gesturing toward Mary, [the angel points to the heavens!](#) Here we find a spiritual sign in accord with the Gospel. [It depicts a call. The scene symbolizes what God is doing,](#) and what God wants to accomplish.
- Now, admittedly, Merson's painting reflects its French Romantic heritage. The colors are warm and all the edges are softened, making the setting positively evocative. The humble simplicity of the farm buildings are portrayed in the most attractive way. Our media-trained suspicion of anything false or manipulative can keep us from accepting Merson's depiction of the Annunciation. But then, [consider the contrast provided by many contemporary](#)

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paintings titled, *Annunciation*. Some of them appeal to me. But being evocative or stirring does not necessarily mean a painting expresses *the holy*.

- *It depends on an artist's awareness, not only of the Annunciation in art history, but also its meaning for the faith community. In my perception, many contemporary artists simply do not address the spiritual significance of the Annunciation.* Consider a surprising example, on an album I listened to in high school, Santana's *Abraxas*. The record's title, *Abraxas*, is derived from ancient Gnostic cosmology. The word is found in a Hermann Hesse novel, and suggests *illumination through cognitive discovery*. The album cover features an astonishing painting by Mati Klarwein, titled, *Annunciation!* His painting demonstrates technical virtuosity, and contains clear and recognizable references to Luke's story. But it appears *completely* to miss the spiritual significance of the *biblical* narrative for which it is named. After all, the Annunciation was given by the almighty, *not to teach us* to help ourselves reach higher and achieve more. God sent an angelic messenger *to rescue us* from our limitations and problems. *Light came to us precisely because we are a people who dwell in darkness.*
- In the Gospels, the Annunciation brings a *private* experience to Mary. For who feels comfortable speaking about encountering God? *More people have these moments than are willing to talk about them.* Instead, we focus on the *lowest* common denominator between us, and on *less risky* things. We act as if *ultimate reality* should *not* determine our daily lives, nor shape the horizon toward which we head. And yet, *as angels and prophets remind us, God will be God. His self-revealing theophanies call to account our avoidance of his glory.*
- Greeted by *true* glory, Mary says what we *struggle* to say. *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* She refers to the Word of Life, which is the Word of *Light*. We *seek* to hear this word because our world is filled with darkness and words of despair. But, as the angel said to Mary, *"nothing will be impossible with God."* Mary endures as a symbol of the Church because she believed in *the glorious impossible*.² And because she

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was open to the part she was invited to play within it. This is to believe that [light shines in the darkness](#), and that darkness is not able to comprehend it.³ This light still shines, in you and in me, and within the world around us.



Luc-Olivier Merson, *Annunciation*, 1908

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¹ See Isaiah 9:2 and Matthew 4:16.

² To borrow a phrase from Madeleine L'Engle, which she used as the title for a book featuring Giotto's paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel.

³ As the RSV translation renders some of the words in John 1:5.