

Sermon for the Annunciation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, April 9, 2018
Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Isaiah 7:10–14, Psalm 40:5–10, Hebrews 10:5–10, Luke 1:26–38

While I was in seminary, James Dunkly, a New Testament scholar who served as Nashotah House’s librarian, was the preacher for a feast of the Annunciation during Lent. In his sermon he made reference to the composer Franz Joseph Haydn’s *Missa in tempore belli*—*Mass in the Time of War*. I remember he held my attention—and enough so that I still remember him preaching about Mass in the time of spiritual war. Today we celebrate this feast of the Annunciation in the time of victory. In the words of the hymn we sang yesterday at Solemn Mass, “Death is conquered, we are free, Christ has won the victory.”¹ But before we go there, I want to look back at a sermon I remember preaching on the Annunciation.

Perhaps it was ten years ago, I began my sermon for this feast with the question, “If Mary had said, ‘No,’ would God still have loved here?” Since then, I’ve thought that it was the best opening I had ever had for

¹ Cecil Frances Alexander, “He is risen, he is risen,” *The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), no. 180.

this feast. But I realized last December, as I prepared to preach on Christmas Eve, I was wrong to ask the question. Gabriel does not visit Mary to ask her if she will be the mother of Jesus, but to tell her directly, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”²

As I began to read through my books the other day, I realized there was something else I had missed—neglected—all these years. Question: Why was Mary full of grace? It’s an expression used in Genesis of Noah, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD . . . [he] was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.”³ Luke’s words about Mary suggests she too, in a sense, was like Noah, one who walked, as it were, with God.⁴

The late Harvard Divinity School professor, François Bovon, a Swiss Protestant, insists that the favor Mary received “does not at all describe human activity, but

² Luke 1:31.

³ Genesis 6:8–9.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 28, 28A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), I: 346. Also, Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 288.

rather expresses God's gracious election."⁵ But the verb here with reference to Mary is "active."⁶ Mary is the subject; "have found favor" is what she has done. Was who Mary was part of the reason God looked with favor on her? Humankind began again in Genesis with a man who walked with God. With the birth of God's Son, God has done more than end any fear of humankind being wiped out by floods. God will give all of the descendants of God's son Adam a share in the risen life of God's son Jesus.

Tonight I find myself wondering how different the story of Jesus' annunciation might have been if Mark had told it. In Mark, from the moment of Jesus' baptism until he dies on the cross, Jesus is in a struggle with Satan. His main purpose is, in the words of the late Ernst Käsemann, "clearing the earth of demons."⁷ How would Satan have hounded the newborn child of Mary?

In Matthew, not only does Joseph learn in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary, who is with child, as his

⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 50.

⁶ Aorist Indicative Active, 2nd person singular.

⁷ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 190.

wife,⁸ he learns after the child is born to take them to Egypt. Herod plans to kill the young boys in Bethlehem. The family will return not to their home in Bethlehem, but to Nazareth, where the child will be safe.⁹

I'm sure I wasn't old enough to watch the television show *The Twilight Zone* in 1961, when the young actor Billy Mummy—who is exactly 19 days older than I—and was the kid in a TV show that I did watch while growing up, *Lost in Space*. In the *Twilight Zone* episode (which I've watched since then thanks to the SYFI channel), he played a child who is a monster, one who can read the minds of others. He also kills and maims with his thoughts if someone displeases him in any way.¹⁰ Now, if John's gospel were to have a narrative of Jesus as an infant or a child, he would probably have to be the opposite of the child monster of that episode of *The Twilight Zone*—the episode was called, ironically, “It's a Good Life.”

⁸ Matthew 1:18–25.

⁹ Matthew 2:13–23.

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_a_Good_Life_\(The_Twilight_Zone\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_a_Good_Life_(The_Twilight_Zone)), (accessed 9 April 2018).

You and I can give great thanks to God for the beginnings of the victory of life with the birth of Jesus. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John have something to contribute to the realities of human history. The reports of the war in Syria call for Mark's Jesus to defeat death. The suffering of the hungry, the sick, prisoners, and strangers calls for Matthew's Jesus who spoke of those who fed him, who gave him drink, who cared for him when he was sick, who visited him in prison, and who welcomed him when he was a stranger.¹¹

John's Jesus is the Good Shepherd—and Satan and death can never snatch away his sheep.¹² Luke's Jesus is also a shepherd, one who seeks out his sheep who are lost, lays them gently on his shoulders, and carries them home.¹³

God is always looking for his daughters and sons. I close with a paraphrase of beautiful words of the prophet Micah, “He has showed you, O human”—the Hebrew here is *adam*, “human”—“what is good; and what does the LORD require of you” [and me] “but to

¹¹ Matthew 25:31–46.

¹² John 10:1–30.

¹³ Luke 15:4–6.

do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly
with [our] God?”¹⁴

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁴ Micah 6:8.