

Sermon for the Eve of the Annunciation, March 24, 2017

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

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

I pulled out the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* the other day to look up the entry for a word that I've been paying more attention to since last Easter. The gospel for Easter morning, of course, is John's account of the resurrection—Mary Magdalene, Peter and the disciple we know only as “the disciple Jesus loved” at the tomb. Quite honestly, I was looking for something to help me with John—on which I think I have preached for 28 Easter mornings in a row—so I turned to Matthew. It's the only other gospel where the risen Jesus himself speaks on the morning of the resurrection. And I got lucky.

In Matthew, the women meet an angel at the tomb. They learn Jesus has risen. The angel tells them to go and tell Jesus' disciples that he will meet them in Galilee. The women leave with “fear and great joy.”<sup>1</sup> Professor Ulrich Luz's commentary on Matthew argues that Jesus' greeting to the women should be translated by its ordinary meaning, “Rejoice,” and not

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:8.

as a greeting, “Hail.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus addressed the faithful joy of the women’s hearts, not their fears.

It turns out, the same choice comes up in Luke in the translation of this same word in the annunciation to Mary. We have our choice, “Hail, favored one,”<sup>3</sup> “Greetings, favored one,”<sup>4</sup> or “Rejoice, favored one.”<sup>5</sup> Though the subject comes up in my reference books, none of the commentaries suggests that Mary—and you and I—could hear the greeting all three ways at the same time; but I think we can. An angel—a “messenger”—from the “Most High” has come to Mary. She’s troubled. She’s concerned. Unlike the shepherds the angels will visit on the night of the child’s birth, she’s not afraid of Gabriel or fearful of his words. She is already the favored one. I don’t think it is a stretch to understand Gabriel’s greeting as a gentle, quiet invitation to joy, an invitation to Mary and to us.

In his commentary on Luke, the late François Bovon—he taught for many years at Harvard; he died

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:9. See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 607.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:28, Revised Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup> New Revised Standard Version; New American Bible, Revised Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Luz, 43.

just two years after retiring on All Saints' Day in 2013—translates Gabriel's assurance to Mary this way. "From God"—not with God, but—"From God nothing will be impossible."<sup>6</sup> The best manuscripts are on his side.<sup>7</sup> He wrote, "It is a Hebrew Bible [belief] that, for God, nothing is impossible."<sup>8</sup> Luke makes this Old Testament conviction a familiar New Testament conviction. Again, "For from God nothing will be impossible." With these words the Evangelist is proclaiming the power of God to act in human history, the power to hear our prayers of intercession and to answer them.

It's fair to say that there's no natural law philosophy in Luke's world view. It's not God versus nature, Bovon says, but the contrast between a "powerful God and powerless humanity."<sup>9</sup>

Of the four gospels, I think Mark<sup>10</sup> and Luke, more explicitly than Matthew and John, embrace a world

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:37. See *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Corrected Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 130.

<sup>8</sup> Luz, 53.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 72, 190.

view that includes the presence and reality of evil, a view that may seem out of place much in the culture of our time. Yet the shadows of many evils are not far from us. The great truth we proclaim is that Jesus has triumphed over the greatest power of evil, his triumph over death.

Finally, I think it's correct to say that the celebration of the Annunciation to Mary is the last of the celebrations of events in the New Testament in Jesus' life to enter the church's calendar. Paul and Mark aren't interested in the details of Jesus' early life. But by the time Matthew, Luke, and John are writing, they have more to say about who he is.

The birth stories in Matthew—the Annunciation to Joseph—and in Luke, along with the beginning of John's gospel, belong to the last stages of preaching about Jesus to be found in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

The annunciation to Joseph in Matthew uses very different language from John, but Matthew's gospel proclamation that Jesus is “God with us”<sup>11</sup> is speaking

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 1:23.

to the same the truth as John's "Word made flesh."<sup>12</sup> Tonight, I think the parallel for Luke are the words Gabriel speaks: "From God nothing will be impossible."<sup>13</sup> From the power of God springs our Christian hope. And the great sign of that power, for Matthew and for Luke, is the birth of God's son by the Virgin Mary. He is God with us, and of his sovereign power there will be no end.

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

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<sup>12</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 1:37.