

Open to Mystery
Luke 1:28-36
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At our house, Sara and I have been watching the Netflix drama, *The Crown*. Anyone else watching this right now? *The Crown* tells the story of the Queen of England, Queen Elizabeth the II. The series starts by following the illness and death of Elizabeth's father, King George the VI and the transfer of the crown to the young Queen. The show also tells the story of why Elizabeth's father was the king in the first place because her uncle King Edward abdicated the throne because he had fallen in love with divorced American socialite Wallis Simpson. This story is worthy of the pages of the Bible, and the church figures prominently in this drama too.

There's an episode that follows the preparations for the Queen's coronation that I think creates some context for the Annunciation, or today's passage that announces the coming birth of Jesus.

The episode begins with Elizabeth as a young girl and she's helping her father practice for his coronation. He tells her, "I need an archbishop," and the young girl takes her place in front of him.

Then he says to her, "You have to anoint me otherwise I can't be king. Do you understand? When the holy oil touches me, I am transformed, brought into direct contact with the Divine. Forever changed. Bound to God. This is the most important part of the entire ceremony, so we had better practice, hadn't we, archbishop." And the young Elizabeth runs through the script with her father and practices anointing his hands, breast, and head.

Then at the end of the episode, we hear from Elizabeth's uncle Edward, the king who abdicated the throne. Edward is not allowed to go to Elizabeth's coronation because of his scandalous marriage. Instead he is at his home in Paris watching the coronation of his niece on television.

Edward is narrating everything that is happening at the coronation for his guests. But when the anointing comes, the television cuts out. You can hear what is happening, but you can't see anything.

One of the guests says to Edward, "Where did she go?"

Edward says, "Now we come to the anointing , the single most holy, most solemn, most sacred moment in the service."

The guest says, “so how come we don’t get to see it.”

Edward replies, “because we are mortals.....There’s oils and oaths, orbs and scepters, symbol upon symbol, an unfathomable web of arcane mystery and liturgy blurring so many lines, no clergyman, historian, or lawyer could untangle any of it.”

The guest says, “it’s crazy.”

Edward replies, “On the contrary, it’s perfectly sane. Who wants transparency when you can have magic? Who wants prose when you can have poetry? Pull away the veil and what are you left with? An ordinary young woman of modest ability and little imagination, but wrap her up like this and anoint her with oil, and hey presto, what do you have? A goddess.”

This dialogue helps me be more appreciative of the story of the Annunciation. The miracle of the virgin birth has troubled many a rational congregationalist, myself included. The miracle looms so large in how Christians often tell this story, that it overshadows the other meaning that is there, the more important meaning.

The heart of this announcement is that this child will be a king. In two verses Gabriel mentions kingship five times, “Jesus 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, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

This is how you tell the story of a monarch, with blurred lines between the mortal and the immortal, with mystery and miracle. Someone in the first century wouldn’t have been surprised by this or challenged by it. They were used to monarchy, and they were used to the stories told about monarchs, that they live across this boundary of the mortal and the immortal. When kings of Israel were anointed, they were called Son of God. There were virgin births in the Roman empire. This is the mystery that surrounds kings.

What would have challenged someone in the first century, is the way this story blurs different boundaries. This story also blurs the line between monarchy and common people and common places. It blurs the lines between the Divine and the poor and the humble. This is just as miraculous, just as mysterious.

Here we have an announcement that God’s design for rescuing the world is going through Mary, not Queen Elizabeth, but Mary an ordinary girl; through Nazareth, in Galilee, the flyover country of the holy land. God’s love is going to enter the world through the humble and the ordinary.

In the next scene in the gospel of Luke, Mary goes to see Elizabeth, and then Mary sings. Mary sings a song that shows us what God's rescuing of the world will look like, what the Christ child will be up to, and what the church will be too, as the living Christ for the world throughout time. Mary will sing of God scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. Mary sings of this humble king, turning the world upside down.

How could God's power to change the world come in such a humble and simple package? This also seems impossible, maybe more so. Not just in the first century, but now too. In the midst of this Gabriel says, "But nothing is impossible with God."

Like the King of England was saying earlier, we proclaim that the Christ child is bound to God. We proclaim that the church, the living Christ for the world, is forever changed, transformed by the love of God that is here, moving among us in the simple humble place. There is love here that transforms hearts and lives. There is love here that can move through us, simple ordinary people, to transform the world.

We may wonder how this can be because we are used to the church being powerless rather than powerful. The church increasingly seems like an afterthought in our increasingly busy secular culture. Gabriel says again, "But nothing is impossible with God."

Thinking about the mystery of powerful love from humble places reminded me of an experience I had this summer.

This summer while I was on sabbatical, and we were traveling north from our time in Florida, we stayed overnight in Montgomery, AL. We stayed in a hotel downtown, and as we walked to get some food, we started reading the signs that had been posted by the Montgomery's Equal Justice Initiative about the slave trade in Montgomery, that it had one of the largest slave populations of cities in the south and many slaves were warehoused there. After supper we walked two blocks up the street where many slaves were once transported in shackles to warehouses, to see the spot where Rosa Parks got on the bus to start the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Six blocks from there is the Alabama State Capitol building, with a big white statue of Jefferson Davis looking down on the streets of Montgomery. Just in front of the capitol building is a large state supreme court building, other large beautiful government buildings. A block behind the capitol is the first white house of the confederacy. There is all this racially charged history in this place.

I eagerly started walking towards those buildings because the first church Martin Luther King Jr. served was on that street. I walked quickly, my family keeping pace, and then I came upon the church. Not huge, but not small, beautiful stained glass windows, clearly very well kept over time. And I checked my map and I checked the name and it wasn't the church.

I walked another block and across the street was a very small church, very humble in appearance. This church had never been a fancy building and it wasn't now. I walked across the street to the sign, Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. It is literally right next to large government buildings, a block away from the capitol building, dwarfed in size by all of them. Through this congregation, King led the bus boycott. This congregation helped mobilize churches to sustain the bus boycott. This humble little church, and the love of God in the midst of it, changed not just Montgomery but our entire nation.

I stood there in awe, wondering how a church that was so small, could sit in the middle of all of this history and all of this power, and then have an impact so big. How is it that love can do that? How miraculous. How mysterious.

And, Municipal ID would not have passed at the City Council if it hadn't been for Northfield churches working with other community groups, St. Dominics and this church through ISAIAH. The word is that Minneapolis is now paying attention to humble Northfield and wondering if Municipal ID should be approved by the big city.

I invite us to think about love from humble places surprising us with its power. Love in simple forms making a bigger difference than we thought possible. In our world. In our lives. Love like this is difficult to explain which is the territory of mystery. Love like this seems to violate the rules that we expect to be governing the world which is the territory of miracle.

The Christ child comes to us all wrapped up in mystery and miracle. Thanks be to God. Amen.