



The Annunciation



Lectio

Be still in mind and body as you prepare to experience the inspired Word. Light a candle, ring a bell or chime, kiss the text, or perform some other action to help you focus on the sacred text. Breathe slowly, calling on the same Holy Spirit who filled the sacred writers to fill your heart. Read the text aloud, seeing the text with your eyes, vocalizing the text with your lips, and hearing the text with your ears.

Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, 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, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.



God's intervention in the world through Mary was unlike anything ever before in the history of salvation. Although God had prepared the way through the deeds of other remarkable women of Israel, Mary's virginal conception highlights the radical newness of God's action. God's unexpected grace was not a response to her yearning for a child, nor was it the result of anything she could have anticipated. God was doing an extraordinarily new thing in response to the watchful

longing of God's people. The child to be born would be the Messiah, the One who would be given the throne of David with an unending kingdom, and he would be the Son of God because he would be conceived through the overshadowing power of God's Spirit.

Mary was among the most powerless in her society. She was poor in a culture in which wealth was esteemed; she was female in a world in which men ruled; she was young in a society in which age was honored. That she should be highly favored by God shows how God works—continually reversing the expectations of the world and lifting up the lowly.

Mary's son would be a divine king. Unlike David, whose reign was bounded by the borders of time and Israel's empire, this king would fulfill all of history and embrace all of time, and "of his kingdom there will be no end." But he would not come from splendid palaces, arrayed in royal robes, and doing battle with enemies. He would come through Mary's womb, a hungry and crying child, the hope of the entire world.

At the annunciation, Luke begins to portray Mary as the original model of the Christian believer and disciple. Although she is favored with God's grace, she does not understand. She asks, "How can this be?" and the angel replies, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Without comprehending God's plan, she accepts her mission with trust: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary opens a space for the divine presence to dwell within her, enabling God to make a new home within all of humankind. Saint Augustine said that Mary, full of faith, conceived Christ first in her heart before conceiving him in her womb.



Visio

Gaze upon this image and let it draw you into the scene. Fix your eyes upon the face and gestures of both the angel and Mary. Imagine the emotions present in this scene, and let them lead you into the heart of Mary. Notice the colors and symbols and seek to relate them to the biblical text. Let the uncreated light of the icon illumine your heart with God's grace.

The annunciation is an event that must be approached with quiet and deep reverence. It is the mystery by which Christ entered the world. In Mary, heaven and earth meet. The divide that separated God and humanity begins to be healed. For this reason, the icon of the annunciation is often placed on the royal doors of Orthodox churches, the gateway to the sanctuary. This mystery of the Word incarnate in the Virgin Mary leads worshipers into the holy and saving presence of God. Just as Mary received Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—at the annunciation, we experience the same in the holy Eucharist.

Gabriel is one of God's archangels. The wings symbolize his work as a divine messenger, able to serve God with quick and agile service. The bright robes radiate with divine energy and suggest an ethereal existence, and the angel's feet suggest that he is hovering above the ground. The greeting of the angel—"Shalom Miriam, Ave Maria, Hail Mary"—has been the source for some of the world's most beautiful music and the inspiration for some of the world's finest art.

Mary has risen from her seat, ready to listen. Her right hand is turned upward, suggesting her initial reserve—"How can this be?"—but her bowed head prepares for her humble submission to God's will. She has been given the honored title of *Theotokos*—the one who gives birth to the One who is God.

In the tradition of ancient Israel, the mother of the king in the line of David received great honor. Sitting on a throne to the right of her son, she was considered the queen in the kingdom and an advocate for the people (1 Kgs 2:19–20). As the fulfillment of this tradition, Mary will be the royal mother in the kingdom of her Son, and her seat and the cushions behind her suggest a throne. The humble maiden will become the queen of heaven and earth.

Mary holds a spindle of scarlet yarn, which will become a veil for the Temple sanctuary. Although this veil concealed the holy of holies, the place of God's mysterious presence, the child beginning to form within her womb will be the new temple and reveal the fullness of God. Christ himself as the Son of God is shown in the divine realm at the top of the icon, the One who will be formed in Mary's womb as she freely and selflessly says "yes" to the word of God.



Meditatio

Reflect on the inspired text and sacred icon so that God's word becomes a living word for you. Allow the text and image to interact with your own world of memories, concerns, and hopes until you become aware of the personal messages the divine word is offering to you today.

- Gabriel's salutation, "Greetings, favored one!"—literally, "Rejoice, you who have been filled with grace!"—indicates that the angel knows more about Mary than she realized about herself. The divine grace working within her was a gift of God's love. Ponder these words as Mary did, and let them lead you to an awareness of God's desire for you.
- The message of the angel to Mary reveals the identity of Jesus and some of his most important titles. What do these words suggest to you about the nature of Mary's Son and the type of mission he will receive?
- God worked in the life of Mary, not because of her own merits or worthiness, but because of her trusting faith. How does the annunciation show how God works in the lives of his people? What hope does this offer to you?
- Fear and insecurities so often enslave people and close them off from life's possibilities. Gabriel's urging Mary not to fear and Mary's calm acceptance illustrate a way to overcome anxiety in order to live with more freedom. In what ways do you desire to live more fully? How can this meditation help you to do that?
- Mary received the word of God in her heart and thus consented to conceive the Son of God in her womb. How can the example of Mary teach you how to receive God's word and allow it to transform your life?
- What feelings might Mary have experienced at the message of the angel? What might have been most difficult for her? How can her

acceptance give you courage? When do you need to hear the words of the angel: "Nothing will be impossible with God"?

Oratio

Respond in prayer to God's word to you, imitating the trusting faith and humble acceptance of Mary. Begin with this prayer, then continue to pray in your own words.

- Most High God, who surprised and blessed Mary with the revelation of your plan for her life, show me how to receive your grace with trust and humility. Teach me how to prepare my heart to truly hear your voice as you speak your word to me, so that your will may be done in me. May I turn to Mary, your favored daughter, so that I can receive your word and that it might take flesh in my life. . . .

Contemplatio

When the words of your prayer begin to seem inadequate and no longer necessary, move into wordless contemplative prayer.

- Ask that the power of the Holy Spirit overshadow you as you rest in God's presence. With a receptive heart like Mary, simply receive the grace God wishes to give you at this moment.

Operatio

Consider ways that you would like to act on your experience of God's word today, and make a commitment to change one aspect of your life.

- Awareness of God's presence and receptivity to God's will gradually transform human life, releasing fears and relieving anxiety. In what ways do you desire to live more fully and freely as a result of your prayerful reflection on the annunciation? How will you accomplish this today?