

The Annunciation

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The Feast of the Annunciation celebrates the visit of the archangel Gabriel to Mary, proclaiming God's plan that she would give birth to His Son.

We read the story of the Annunciation in Luke 1: 24-38. It begins with Gabriel saluting Mary with "Hail," which can be translated as "Rejoice." One of the recurring phrases with which Mary is addressed in Orthodox worship is, "Rejoice, O unwedded bride." Origen wrote that a salutation like this is never "addressed to a man; such a special greeting was reserved only for Mary."

Gabriel tells Mary, "The Lord is with you." These words alert us that God is going to do something extraordinary with the person to whom they are addressed. In the Old Testament, Nathan says the words to King David when David plans to build a temple for the Lord (2 Samuel 7:3). In Judges 6: 12 the angel of the Lord comes to encourage Gideon to fight the Midianites, and says, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor" (Judges 6: 12).

Mary is understandably troubled by Gabriel's words, and by his formal greeting. She is, after all, just a young girl. In answer to her question of how the birth will take place, Gabriel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." His words tell us that this is a uniquely miraculous birth, far beyond any other, including the birth of John the Baptizer which Gabriel also has foretold.

Once again, similar words occur in the Old Testament, describing something important. In Isaiah 32: 15-20 we read about the future transformation of everything in creation, when "the Spirit is [will be] poured upon us from on high."

Luke uses words that tie Christ's birth to the Old Testament, the preparation for His coming, to remind us that God always prepares us for things. But then he makes it clear that this birth, the coming of Christ, is the end and fulfillment of all that preparation. Gabriel says: "...and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Young Mary stands in the presence of this imposing celestial being. She hears these life-changing words. She knows that Gabriel is waiting for her response. Without equivocation, without any more questions, she calmly says, "Let it be to me according to your word."

Her decision will be costly—Simeon will soon tell her of the sword that is to pierce her soul. But she trusts that agreeing to be "the handmaid of the Lord" is the right thing. A reading from Hebrews 2: 14, tells us that it is indeed the right thing for our salvation: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he [Christ] himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." Mary is the one through whom this deliverance took place.

Troparion - Tone 4

Today is the beginning of our salvation,
The revelation of the eternal mystery!
The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin
As Gabriel announces the coming of Grace.
Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos:
Rejoice, O Full of Grace,
The Lord is with You!