Peace: When Trust and Courage Intertwine

As we enter into a time of reflection, we recognize with gratitude our freedom to be gathered for worship – on the live stream and on this land loved across time by First Nations and others and where we are now building our community. I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in the present moment.

Holy, loving Spirit – pour out your power among us. Lead us along new paths of trust and courage. Cocreate with us in your ways of love and justice – so that deep, true peace feels less elusive and more of a possible reality. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

For most of my life, I have felt some level of aversion to the gospel story of the annunciation – that is, this narrative of the Angel Gabriel presenting Mary with the news that she would bear a child. I have come to recognize that my aversion has more to do with the layers of meaning people have piled on top of the story than with the story itself.

Any given church – that is, any local group of people seeking to follow Jesus in the way of love toward God, self and other – exists along multiple spectra of Christian expression. The spectrum I have in mind today in regard to this story has, at one extreme, a doctrinaire or rigid approach to the teachings of our Bible and our faith and, on the other extreme, a liberal or flexible approach to the teachings of our faith.

People can spiritually flourish anywhere along the spectrum. My childhood church (on the rigid end of the spectrum) was a spiritual desert for me. Yet I witnessed many adults seeming to find comfort in the assurance that faith in their correct beliefs would lead to an afterlife in heaven. I longed to find a more pluralistic faith community in which we could continuously interpret and apply Jesus' teachings to our lives while also appreciating the truth and beauty in other paths.

I have purposefully digressed before bringing us back to the story of the annunciation. I will try to convey how this story was one of many lifeless anecdotes in my childhood religious desert experience. I said a moment ago that my aversion to it has more to do with the layers of meaning people have piled on top of the story than with the story itself.

In a nutshell, this was the meaning that my church told me was contained in the story (and it's one that you maybe you have also been letting go of): Jesus would come to the world in order to die so that his blood could pay the debt for all my sins and the sins of the whole world. God had chosen Mary to become pregnant with Jesus – not through sex but by the Holy Spirit's power. Mary's and Joseph's ancestral ties meant that the birth of Jesus into their family fulfilled the longings in Jewish scripture for a Messiah to save the people. Christians recognize that the Jewish people always have and continue to misunderstand what kind of salvation God intended for them. Oh! And Mary had no choice in the matter. And also, how blessed she was to be preordained to be the mother of God's only perfect child! And how fortunate for us that we correctly understand the meaning of the story.

Yikes. As a child and teenager, I wondered if that was all there was to the story – a punishing God, a woman with no agency, a superhero baby, and an afterlife into which we would want to follow Jesus.

I invite you to explore with me how this story is about trust and courage. I think the term blind trust is a misnomer. If follow the lead of someone who appears shiny and smooth in their movements, I am dependent but not necessarily trusting. If following feels easy, it is more likely a movement of least resistance than a movement of trust. To trust is a choice – a big one. And the path of trust is full of friction and grit because the road can be rough.

In today's reading, an early sign of Mary's openness to trust comes in the form of a question.

We heard: *"But [Mary] was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be… Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'"*

Showing honest emotions, straightforward thoughts, and daring to ask questions are ways that we all build trust.

And the angel affirmed her in her question by saying, *"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."*

Another indication of Mary's capacity to trust shows up as courageous acceptance. She must have taken a deep, deep breath and found a space inside her where she knew that she could do hard things.

"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."

Let's hear from today's poet for a few more reflections on how trust and courage intertwine.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer wrote – and I'm not sure we're all used to saying this to ourselves, but - *"You do not need to know what comes next… The mind, no matter how clear, will never become a crystal ball."*

How might openness to not knowing what the future holds help you build trust in some hard thing that you're facing?

"It is no small thing to trust yourself," she writes.
"It's okay to cry. It is right that love should shake your body,
that you should find yourself trembling
in the rubble and dust
after all your certainties come down."

Isn't it interesting how we find ourselves eventually letting go – sometimes in some dirty rubble and dust and exhaustion from trying to go it alone? Doesn't letting go in the rubble and dust help us to build openness to trust?

And I love the way the poem comes to a close:

"Here on this cliff of uncertainty
there is a stillness in you
so spirited, so alive
the wisest part of your body
is dancing."

It takes uncertainty in order to build trust. And in that space of trust (in a time of uncertainty), we can find access to courage to do the hard thing. I wonder what hard thing you are facing at this time in your life. And will you invite God to build trust and courage in you until it dances with God's powerful peace.

Let's take deep breaths with Mary in this coming week, because we too can do hard things. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Luke 1:26-38, "Note to Self Above the Paradox Valley"