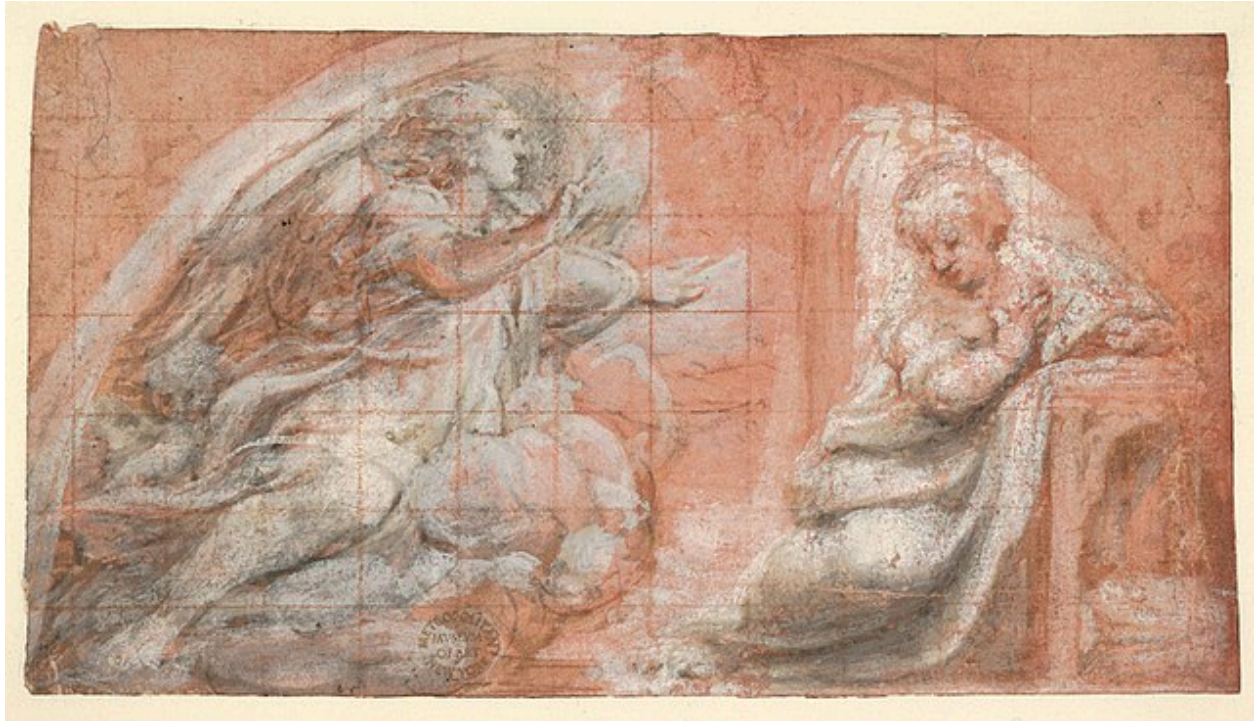




Choosing Your Path

Joy T. Barnitz



*“Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked,
in which you can walk with love and reverence.”*

- Henry David Thoreau²

¹ This sermon draws on Advent and Epiphany Scripture passages to make its point about the impact of our choices and our “turning again” (repentance) being essential to our regeneration. It is derived from two sermons: “Being Present with LOVE,” preached on 17 December 2023 at Niles Discovery Church (a church dually aligned with the United Church of Christ and with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), this is my home church, a video and PDF are available at <https://www.nilesdiscoverychurch.org/apps/Sermon.php?SermonID=834>), in Fremont, CA and “Choosing Your Path,” preached on 7 January 2024 at The Good Table UCC, in El Cerrito, CA. I am grateful to Rev. Jeffrey Spencer who shared this vision of Gabriel searching for a young woman to bear Jesus in a Niles Discovery Church Bible Study.

² https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henry_david_thoreau_133537 (accessed 26 December 2023)



I am struck by how often discussions that arise during Bible Study find their way into my sermons. In a recent study of the Scripture passage from Luke, the discussion focused on some of the following questions: why is Joseph's lineage mentioned here, he's not Jesus' real father, is he? And what did people know about conception at the time of Jesus' birth? When were Joseph and Mary actually married? Why is evil permitted by God, and what is the nature of free will? Heady stuff, I must admit. And then the pastor casually mentioned that when he hears this story of Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is "favored by God" and that, although she is a virgin, she will bear a child because "for God all things are possible," what he wonders is: was Gabriel searching through Nazareth, and maybe beyond, to find a woman who would say "yes."? I am left with this image of Gabriel holding a lamp going, "Are you the one? Are you the one?" to all the young women he met. And I imagine him getting a whole lot of "Nos" to his question! I invite you to close your eyes for just a moment and imagine the Annunciation, imagine yourself as part of it. Where are you standing or sitting? What are you doing? What are you feeling?

One of my favorite, and most useful, classes in seminary was the required class on visual art in religion. My professor took us through the history of Christianity as seen and incarnated in art and architecture. Among the lasting impressions I have from that class is how much cultural context impacted the way key Biblical figures were depicted. Take a look at Sandro Botticelli's version (see link in footnote³) and note that Gabriel appears to be pleading with Mary, who seems to me to be resisting his request. Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation (see link in footnote⁴) has a seemingly more receptive Mary, and Gabriel seems to be speaking to an equal. However, in both of these, I am a little baffled as Mary looks like a noble woman of the Renaissance and not like a peasant in a desert village in Galilee! So, when I saw Henry Ossawa Tanner's interpretation (see link in footnote⁵), it caught my heart: Gabriel isn't formed, the angel is just a light-beam. Mary is depicted as a young woman, in humble settings, thoughtful, contemplating this amazing request she has just received, and having not yet decided what she will say. This is the very moment of Mary's choice, God's messenger, Gabriel, visits a doubting person and calls her to an uncertain future. Perhaps you have had such a moment when you faced a choice. Maybe it even felt like an encounter with an angel or maybe not.

One line from my very first public speech, way back in high school, resonated as I prepared this sermon: "Life is a series of challenges, choices and decisions," said a bold 18-year-old. I'm sure that when you look back, you see some life-changing decision points in your life. One of mine was the decision to go to New College in Florida, where I met my husband and where I developed critical thinking skills, not just in the science classes that formed my majors, but also in my many humanities classes in philosophy, literature, and the arts. These non-science classes formed a solid foundation

³ Sandro Botticelli, *Cestello Annunciation* (1489) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cestello_Annunciation (accessed 15 December 2023)

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation* (1472-1476) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_\(Leonardo\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_(Leonardo)) (accessed 15 December 2023)

⁵ Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation* (1898) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Annunciation_\(Tanner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Annunciation_(Tanner)) and <https://store.philamuseum.org/tanner-the-annunciation-1898-archival-poster/> (both accessed 15 December 2023)



when, decades later, I chose to enter seminary. Some life choices are obviously important, such as choosing what job to take. Some choices and decisions simply seem like just another step along a prescribed path, and it's only upon later reflection, that it becomes clear that they were transformational choices. Fulfilling an ordination requirement, I served as a hospital chaplain intern in an acute care hospital in San Francisco. During my first on-call assignment, at about 10:30 pm, I was paged to come to the bedside of a patient in the Emergency Room. It was standing by the bedside of this patient, who spoke only Spanish, which I do not speak and do not understand, that I first experienced what is called "the ministry of presence," the deep connection that connects one person to another and which is totally beyond words. This experience, and the many that have followed, have always surprised me when they arrived. These experiences set me on the path of ministry that led me to a life of interfaith work and hospital chaplaincy in an ethnically and religiously diverse area: the outskirts of Silicon Valley, just north and east of San Jose, California.

These two Scripture selections serve as bookends to the beginning of the Christian church year. The Lukan passage marks the beginning of Advent and of the Christian church year. This beginning, right after Thanksgiving, takes us into the dark of winter in the northern hemisphere. The passage from Matthew tells of the arrival of the wise one and marks Epiphany, the time in the Christian church year when the actual "work of the people" really begins. Advent is over, with its hope for peace, joy, and love. We've celebrated the coming of the Christ child with lessons and carols. As Advent approaches each year, I find it easy to become preoccupied with the "historical reality" around Jesus' birth, considering the order of events and musing about the different ways to calculate Easter and Jesus' birth. I'll just note that, although you might think that the date when Jesus was born would be important to early Christians, the gospels are totally silent on this subject. Early Christians focused more on Easter, which is firmly grounded in the Jewish Passover. It wasn't until the third and fourth centuries that people tried to calculate when Jesus' birth actually occurred which many scholars now think that it was likely between 4 and 7 BCE⁶ based on when Herod the Great was king of Judea. And, no, the popular theory that Christians were subverting the pagan celebration of the winter solstice is speculative and is not based on strong evidence. Scholars now think that March or September were more likely times for Jesus' birth. Reflecting on all this research, I find myself agreeing with one scholar who observed that our modern obsession with dates and chronology is "intellectually fascinating ... but misses the (whole) point spiritually."⁷

I found myself wondering: What is the impact of celebrating Jesus' birth, and the beginning of our "church year," at the darkest time of the year, around the winter solstice? What might be the *spiritual* impact of celebrating God's incarnation among us at the turning of the year? For many of us, darkness is pretty scary, associated with negative feelings: most importantly fear. Bad things happen when people are in the dark! But darkness is also associated with negative feelings of guilt, of shame, of regret; regret for things done ... and for things not done. And yet, according to Isaiah, there are

⁶ BCE is the abbreviation for Before Common Era

⁷ Dave Roos, "When Was Jesus Really Born? Not Dec. 25." 23 December 2021.

<https://people.howstuffworks.com/when-was-jesus-born.htm> (accessed 14 December 2023). Roos is a journalist with a degree in religious studies <https://www.biblicaltimemachine.com/about> (accessed 14 December 2023)



“treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places.”⁸ There’s a quietness and a stillness at this time of the year that makes it a good time for reflection. A time to release things that trouble our hearts and our minds, ... and a time to release things that no longer serve us. The solstice is not only the longest night in the northern hemisphere, it also marks the point when the days begin to lengthen, filled with the promise of new beginnings. Epiphany marks the end of Christmas celebrations and begins a period of “ordinary time” that ends on Ash Wednesday with the beginning of Lent. Epiphany marks a time of the “work of the people” ... the work of *tikkun olam*,⁹ of repairing the world ... our work as the hands and feet of Jesus working to bring heaven to earth.

So how do we link God’s incarnation among us with what we are charged to do in the here and now? For me, it begins with **CHOICE**. I love that the impact of one person’s choice is so apparent in Mary’s choice to say YES! to God’s messenger, the angel Gabriel. Her choice changed the world. And I love Diana Butler Bass’ explanation that the

“... incarnation extends from the smallest particle of physics to the splendor of the universe. It is the presence of love that created the cosmos and came to dwell with us. We encounter it in prayer and in silence, we encounter it in joy and pain. The mindfulness of (the) season of Advent is not an escape from words, but wrestling with The Word that inhabits the world in its radiant beauty and, most surprisingly, even in the maddening injustice all around. We awaken to the enfleshed God by grasping the three spiritual elements of the Christmas story: the vast and the cosmic, the intimate and the homey, and the invisible and hidden. ... the stars themselves interweave with the most intimate of all human experiences: childbirth. Why? Because the same creative power, love, makes both. Love makes both galaxies and babies. Incarnation teaches that all is of a piece.”¹⁰

Bass’ description reminds me of the description of the Divine by Rev. Dr. George F. Dole, a beloved Swedenborgian theologian, scholar, and pastor, when he writes:¹¹

“The most accurate thing we can say about the Divine, given the limitations of our understanding, is that it is infinite ‘love-and-wisdom’ ... God is the very pattern of the universe; but this must not be construed impersonally. The very pattern ... is essentially personal, i.e., loving, wise, and creative.”

For me, Jesus is the God who “suits up” in human form to let us draw near and be enfolded into deep relationship with God. The God who “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,”¹²....

⁸ Isaiah 45:3

⁹ For more information on the meaning of “*tikkun olam*” see:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/> (accessed on 6 January 2024)

¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass, Advent video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pomWh3ukf5s> (accessed 16 December 2023), about 3:40 to end.

¹¹ George F. Dole, *A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg*. (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 121

¹² John 1:14



the God who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ... to save the world.”¹³ The One who loves us so much that we are granted free will ... and we may even choose to distance ourselves from God. Like Mary, we can choose to listen to God’s call ... or not. And when we consider that call, when we choose to accept it, we know that we are stepping into the unknown.

Each time I step into a room at Washington Hospital in Fremont, California, I am entering an unknown and uncertain place. One of the most valuable practices I’ve adopted is one I learned from a UCSF chaplain: upon entering, I pray that I may be enough for whatever is needed in that room at that time. And when I leave the room, I give everyone – the patients, their families, and the staff – back to God ... because I know that I cannot carry them, ... only God can. I trust God to open me to be a conduit to meet the needs I find in the room, and I trust God to be what is needed for each person I encounter.

Each year, Advent offers us the opportunity to gather and release all that has burdened us for a year into the dark silence of the turning of the year. Each year we have a chance to choose to begin again, to repent in the usual translation of the Greek word *metanoia*.¹⁴ To choose again the “path of life,”¹⁵ listening to the still, small voice of God¹⁶, doing the work of “Jesus with skin on” in the words of a Lutheran colleague. We are called to begin that work in earnest during this period of “ordinary time,” which some view as the “season of Epiphany,” a time of responding anew to God’s call.

One description of this call was voiced by the civil rights lawyer and activist Valarie Kaur who wrote the book *See No Stranger* and who founded and leads the Revolutionary Love project.¹⁷ In response to the many injustices that darken the world and cause us to despair, Kaur asks: “what if this darkness is the darkness of the womb, not the darkness of the tomb?” What if we are being called to be midwives to the birth of a new world, one that is more just, where all may flourish? Each time I remember that the word “love” is embedded (backward) in the middle of the word “**Revolution**,”¹⁸ I wonder: how am I being called to follow the radical rabbi Jesus who overturned tables in the Temple courtyard? What path should I take to follow those early Christians in Galatia to whom Paul wrote that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁹ We are revolutionaries ... we are the changemakers, the peacemakers, ... we know what to do and how to do it ... we just need to get our act together. We just need to act our faith in our everyday lives by turning our loving intentions into positive actions right where we are. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? In the words of my youth, and now I am dating myself, to “think globally ... and act locally” by integrating our faith and spiritual lives into our daily, material, embodied lives. We are called to

¹³ John 1:16-17

¹⁴ Metanoia: “a transformative change of heart,” from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia_%28theology%29 (accessed 20 January 2024)

¹⁵ Psalm 16: 11

¹⁶ 1 Kings 19: 12

¹⁷ Valarie Kaur, <https://valariekaur.com/revolutionary-love-project/> (accessed 14 December 2023)

¹⁸ *Love Revolution* postcard, Peace Project

https://peaceproject.com/wp-content/uploads/PC107_Love_Revolution_Postcard.jpg (accessed 14 December 2023)

¹⁹ Galatians 3:28



think spiritually and act materially, to address the “inherited evils”²⁰, those systemic social conditions that one generation may unintentionally, or, sadly, intentionally, cause through their living earthly lives. This is the work of healing the world, of *tikkun olam*²¹. Repair that, like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*²², will bring forth new beauty in our world and in our renewed commitment to following God’s leading.

A fellow congregant at my home church frequently reminds us in weekly Bible Study that Mother Teresa said that “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”²³ I invite you to look around any room, or even a videoconference “room,” where people are gathered for a common purpose and to notice the good things they are doing to make their community better: safer, more sustainable, and more inclusive. Look around you and see all those who join with you in that CHOICE ... in that YES! Individually answering the call and responding together as the body of Christ at work in the world. Recognizing and celebrating how each person is, in their own way, following Jesus’ new commandment: that we are to love one another as he loved his followers²⁴ ... and as God loves each of us and all of us. Our Swedenborgian tradition tells us that we form ourselves for heaven by our lives in the world²⁵. Such formation requires us to act according to our beliefs in our daily lives, and to reflect on those actions. Now is a time for Swedenborgians “to help other churches, other religions, become more effective vehicles bringing a consistent voice for the practical realization of spiritual values,” as George Dole put it in his essay, “A Serving Church.”²⁶ The work of healing the world requires us to “reclaim religion” as a force of good in the World.²⁷ It requires us to choose to follow God’s leading into an uncertain, unknowable, and often uncomfortable future.

My personal journey took me out of church in my teens into the world of science, of corporate work at the cusp of medical innovation as a researcher, as a manager and team leader. In my fifties, I recognized that the “through-line” of my resilience to the many reorganizations, lay-offs and job changes I experienced was in the faith foundation of my childhood. A foundation built on the

²⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* No. 277

²¹ Tikkun olam: “repairing the world.” See <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/> (accessed 20 January 20, 2024)

²² Kintsugi: “Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold or silver lacquer. Rather than hiding the cracks, kintsugi highlights them, transforming the once-broken vessel into a unique and cherished work of art.... kintsugi is more than just an art form – it has a powerful spiritual meaning. By valuing the imperfections of the broken object and using them to create something new and beautiful, kintsugi teaches us to embrace our flaws and find renewal through the process of healing.”

²³ Quotes by Mother Teresa: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6946-not-all-of-us-can-do-great-things-but-we> (accessed 15 December 2023)

²⁴ John 13: 34

²⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, No 360

²⁶ George F. Dole, “A Serving Church,” in *Sorting Things Out* (San Francisco, J. Appleseed & Co., 1994) p. 60.

²⁷ See Rabbi Sharon Brous, “It’s Time to Reclaim Religion,” TED Talk at TED Woman, October 2016, San Francisco, CA. “... somewhere at the. Intersection of these four trends of wakefulness and hope and mightiness and interconnectedness, there is a burgeoning, multifaith justice movement in this country that is staking a claim on a countertrend, saying that religion can and must be a force for good in the world.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/sharon_brous_it_s_time_to_reclaim_religion (at 15:20; accessed 28 January 2024)



invitation to “love the questions,”²⁸ to doubt, to reflect, to act, to be curious as to how a new answer might arrive. Returning to church in the early 2000s, I found myself choosing a path of reflection and discernment, of conscious re-formation and re-generation that took me to local church and denominational leadership and then to seminary as I sought to integrate my life experiences with my life purpose. Surprisingly, after leaving seminary, I found myself a pilgrim, once again “outside” the established limits of one congregation, one denomination, living in a local context where religious, ethnic and cultural diversity is embodied in my neighbors next door. Dole’s concept of a “serving church” became newly relevant as I sought to work with others that, together, we might forge a strong community, where all may flourish. A community that “recognizes, accepts and celebrates”²⁹ that diversity, and does not fear it.

I like thinking of the Wise Ones of the Bible as “pilgrims on a journey in search of the Sacred, invited to follow the ‘star of wonder’ wherever it leads. ... to become aware of the call of the Divine within our own lives by seeking out insight, tuning in to our intuition, and following the path laid out before us.”³⁰ Like Mary, we can say YES! Like the Wise Ones we can make the choice to follow Jesus on a pilgrimage toward the Sacred. We can choose to begin the work we are called to do as individuals ... and as a community. Working together as the body of Christ in the work of repairing the world, the work of bringing heaven to earth. In *True Christianity*, Swedenborg wrote:³¹ “*Now It Is Allowed*, which means that we are now allowed to use our intellect to explore the mysteries of faith.” And by exploring those mysteries, turn our beliefs into action to serve our neighbors, and, by so doing, help ourselves.

I invite you to look at your hands and thank them for all they enable you to do in the world, and to place your hands gently on each side of your head and pledge to use your mind, your discerning intellect to let it guide your choices and help you learn from your actions. And finally, I invite you to place your hands on your heart and acknowledge your loving intentions to live out your YES! in your ordinary, daily life of doing small-but-important things with great love. The work that fills “ordinary time.”

AMEN.

²⁸ Ranier Maria Rilke, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/412347-try-to-love-the-questions-themselves-as-if-they-were> (accessed 30 January 2024)

²⁹ Inspired by Audre Lorde: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/audre_lorde_390625 (accessed 28 January 2024)

³⁰ From “Sacred Seasons: Journeying Through the Liturgical Year.” A perpetual wall calendar by Lacy Clark Ellman (2015) from asacredjourney.net (accessed 6 January 2024)

³¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, translated by Jonathan S. Rose (West Chester, OA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012) No. 508[3].