

**OPENING:**

Maybe this portrait of my maternal grandparents is a familiar one to you and your own family.

My grandfather was a member of the so-called Silent Generation and tended to be the quiet one in the relationship. He was an Episcopal priest, but outside of that setting he was more guarded with his words.

This allowed my grandmother, the matriarch of the family, to command the room and the attention of all. She took control of social situations in an era where that was common of women with hosting and entertaining and the family life.

With those characters in place, the year is 1970 and add to the scene my (future) mother and father, who had a big announcement to make, an “Annunciation” of sort. They wanted to tell my mother’s parents that they wanted to get married. They drove to Sunday dinner at the Rectory with trepidation and excitement, with my father—a hayseed from Orange County (Virginia, not California.... Gordonsville being the Nazareth of the day), he was without a college degree, with facial hair popular from that time period, and a funny last name. ....

So over Sunday dinner, they announced their intentions, asking for a blessing from my taciturn grandfather and chatty grandmother.

What happened next, as the story has been told and retold, was the first time ever in which “my grandfather started talking and my grandmother stopped.”

**ANNUNCIATION:**

That 20<sup>th</sup> century “annunciation” caused one person to go mute and one person to start asking questions. Compare that to our 1<sup>st</sup> century versions:

Famously, Mary responds to Gabriel’s announcement with joy and enthusiastic acceptance. She does so in song, with the *Magnificat*, our Canticle today.

“How can I keep from singing?” is her reaction.

Meanwhile, if you recall the story before this one in Luke, where Gabriel announces the coming of John the Baptist to his father Zechariah, there is a bit of a difference. Zechariah, himself a priest of the Jerusalem temple, is struck dumb by the Angel; he is rendered incapable of speaking and can only communicate with gestures.

Much is made of these two differing reactions.

There is a joke somewhere in there about how it took two women, Mary and Elizabeth (John the Baptist's mother), about forty-five seconds what it took the church (mostly men) the next four hundred and fifty years to sort out in terms of the Incarnation, the doctrine of *Theotokos* (the God-bearer), and what we now say in our creeds.

Regardless, in the wake of such world-changing information, silence or singing seem like realistic and honest reactions to the good news of the birth of the Messiah. These are faithful responses to God's creative, amazing, death-defying activity in this world.

It might cause some to shout with joy and others to grasp for words in confusion.

## **SPEECH**

Last week, we heard about Annie Glenn, the wife of astronaut, John Glenn, who was afflicted with a stutter in her speech until the age of 53. Christine preached that Annie Glenn's disability perhaps afforded her the ability to understand the Advent experience. She possessed within her soul years of waiting and isolation and hopeful expectation. As the wife of an astronaut, she spent a lot of time in the public eye holding her breath for good news and bad. As a stutterer, she spent much of her life alone waiting for the words that were there but would not come.

Such is Advent, a time "pregnant" with new possibilities but also containing uncertainty and fear of what's to come.

We have had a year of that dynamic, and then some.

2020 has meant conversations that would have been occurring between family members have been silenced.

It has closed off the ability to share good news, to share in speech and song the "Glad tidings of comfort and joy."

And the hits keep coming:

this week, a new impediment, a new way of keeping us safe, that also creates distance and blocks communication.

This darn mask on my face. A new order, new statistics, *bad news* as we are called to preach the good.

This last extra punch to the gut that renders us speechless: Masks on at all times indoors.

I agree, of course, with the science and the safety behind it, but it seems like just one more effort to muzzle ourselves.

It almost makes you want to take a vow of silence.

Maybe we, in fact, need to be like Zechariah, maybe we need to be forced to shut up.

Or maybe we are like Mary, and we need to take that (seemingly) “bad news” and turn it into good news.

## **GOOD NEWS**

My parents, just so you know, have been married now for almost 50 years, and they made it work despite the nature of that initial announcement. Their biggest problem, these days, is a good one to have—they just want the opportunity to get out of each other’s hair for a few moments each day.

It’s probably important to note that *our* problems won’t all be solved by December 25<sup>th</sup>, or by the New Year 2021, or even by a vaccine.

The good news of this Advent, and of this Christmas... what they **DO** help us with is.... They remind us that God is with us during that process, that God works through a 13-year-old girl, and a barren childless woman, works through a befuddled priest, and an equally befuddled carpenter, and a baby boy.

In extraordinary times, God can work through ordinary people to do the miraculous.

My guess is that God can even work through this Mask, that God is working through this experience itself to bring us together.

## **DISABILITY:**

Does it go too far, then, to say that this year, this Advent, we have all developed a disability like Annie Glenn, like Zechariah, by virtue of our COVID experience?

I’ll tread lightly with that statement, but we are all, in some ways, incapable now of our normal abilities, we are all silenced and muzzled and homebound, waiting for those (temporary) obstacles to be removed.

It makes me think how Anne Romney, wife of Senator Mitt Romney, spoke about her disability, the disease of multiple sclerosis, during his husband’s 2012

presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup>

She said that “MS has been her greatest teacher.”

It was a tough teacher, she would often say, but that it taught her a lot about suffering, it made her more compassionate towards other, and it taught her about the gift of health in our bodies.

What does COVID teach us about ourselves and our relationship with God? What does it teach us about our responsibilities to one another?

On a personal note, even before the pandemic, I knew that I talked too fast, that I don’t enunciate my words sometimes...

Now you cannot even follow my lips as I speak... so how are my eyebrows doing as conveying body language?

For what it’s worth, the masks that we are wearing are “Singer’s Mask” and so they are supposed to make it capable to belt Hosannas, to be like and Mary and Elizabeth, like John the Baptist and Gabriel with his horn, blowing the Advent message this season through every barrier!

## **CONCLUSION:**

That message, the good news, the Annunciation, tells us that God is with us, Christmas is coming.

So, on Friday, know that this Christmas of 2020 will be somewhat like the 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas, 2000 years ago.

Like the Holy Family, you will be celebrating it with only your immediate relatives, and maybe some animals.

You wish that others could be there, so you will cherish them in your heart.

It might even be lonely and scary, just as was for Mary and Joseph and the baby, all those years ago.

Know that it will also be like the 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas because it required a message broadcast from the outside that we can see and hear, nothing short of a miracle. We will be able to hear it and share it “because with God nothing is impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

**AMEN**

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Cillizza, “Ann Romney on wealth: What did she really mean?” (March 6, 2012) *Washington Post* [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/ann-romney-on-wealth-what-did-she-really-mean/2012/03/06/gIQA344huR\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/ann-romney-on-wealth-what-did-she-really-mean/2012/03/06/gIQA344huR_blog.html)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1.37; “Batteries not Included” *Mockingcast Episode 202* (December 11, 2020) <https://themockingcast.fireside.fm/202>  
Idea for this conclusion can be found at the very end of the episode.