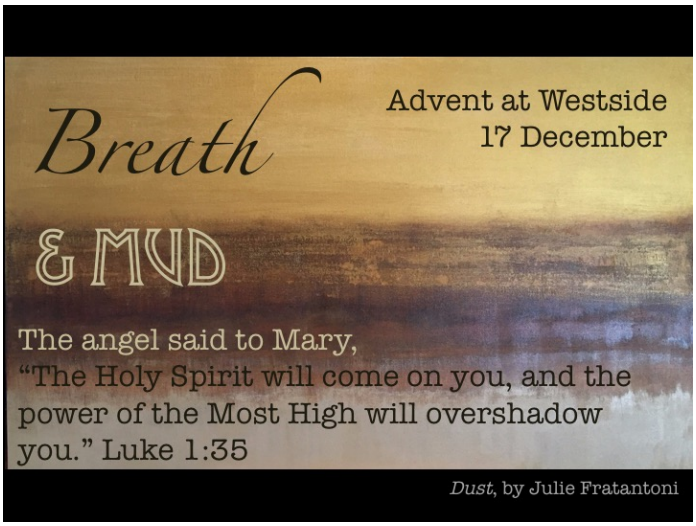
Shadowlands; Series: Breath and Mud
Luke 1:26-38; 46-55
17 December 2017; Westside Fellowship CRC
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge



It was a summer evening in 2010 and a then 4-year old Samara was pretending to be an angel with her bath towel. She flapped her bath towel wings and said, "I have good news for you! You're going to have a baby!" A very non-pregnant Heidi posted this cute moment on facebook with the comment, "Thanks, Gabriella." A month later I conceived, and 10 months later, I gave birth to my third-born, a daughter. All this to say that if Samara start hovering near you with a bath towel, be warned, she just might have an announcement for you!

The Annunciation – *Henry Ossawa Tanner*

This interaction between Mary and Gabriel is a well-known scene in Scripture, not just because it is part of the lead up to the Christmas story, but because this type – this kind of birth announcement scene repeats itself frequently in Scripture. A woman. An angel or representative of the Lord. A promise of a baby. A promise fulfilled. But there is something eerily different about this scene. Unlike Sarah, unlike Rebekah, unlike Rachel, unlike Samson's mother, unlike Hannah, unlike Elizabeth… Mary was not barren. Unlike for Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Samson's mother and Hannah and Elizabeth, Mary had not prayed to God for years to open her womb.

And, unlike all these women, Mary was not married. Sarah had Abraham, Rebekah had Isaac, Rachel had Jacob, Samson's mother had Manoah, Hannah had Elkannah, Elizabeth had Zechariah. For, Mary, she had Joseph, but she did not really *HAVE* Joseph. Not yet.

This angel, though he may have been bright, cast a shadow over Mary's heart and mind. Even before he said anything about a baby, he cast a shadow (v. 29):

"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." Gabriel had said, "greetings" but what kind of greetings were these? Well, these were shadow-y greetings – greetings that held the announcement of a baby to be born to a woman who was not married. As Scott Hoezee writes, "Gabriel's words do not so much solve a problem for Mary as they *create* a problem. This simply was not the time for Mary to have a baby."[1]

And the shadow of the announcement finds its way into the song that Mary sings a few verses later in the company of Elizabeth. The coming of this child – the eruption of the Mighty

[1] http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-4b-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

One's great works - was not good news for everyone. The brightness of the thoughts of the proud? Scattered by the shadow of the Mighty One (v. 51). The shininess of the thrones of rulers? Brought down by the shadow of the Mighty One (v. 52). The glitz of the opulence of the rich? Sent away by the shadow of the Mighty One (v. 53). "C.S. Lewis famously labeled this 'a terrible song,' playing on the Latin word *terribilis*, which means 'dreadful, frightful, fearsome.' The lyrics themselves shake the foundations of all we know."[2]

I wonder how the shadow of the Mighty One has disrupted your life this year.

Perhaps you are a ruler brought down from your throne. Now, maybe you're not a king or a queen or a prince… maybe you don't rule a country and you certainly don't have a gilded golden throne, but you have people who report to you, children that you are the head of, responsibilities to execute, more power than you know… And maybe this year, you were reminded that your power is limited… that people and things are less in your grasp than you thought they were.

Perhaps you are the rich who have been sent away. Now, maybe you would never think of yourself as wealthy or rich – certainly not as rich as a lot of people you know. But you care about the money you have and sometimes you hate to admit how much having it, having enough of it, getting more of it, spending it on things that will increase your status… how much all that matters to you. And maybe this year the fear gripped you, that when the time comes for you to send the kids to high school or university or when the time comes for you to retire or when the time comes for your kids to bury you, you won't have enough… and that fear that there won't be enough leaves you feeling pretty empty right now.

Perhaps you are someone who is proud in their inmost thoughts and you have been scattered. Now, maybe on the outside no one would be able to smell pride. On the outside you are humble, caring, selfless, sharing, but on the inside you are proud. Proud of who you are, of what you've done, of how you hold it together. And in this last year, you have been scattered and rattled to your core. Your pride was uncovered and you felt exposed and ashamed.

Or perhaps you, like Mary, had your life interrupted by something you just weren't planning on. A shadow crossed over the brightness of your life. Something happened and

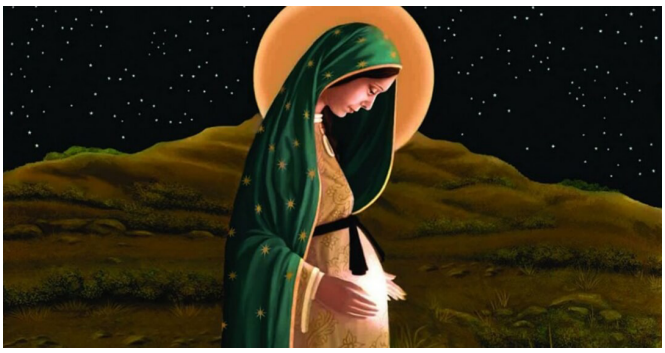
[2] http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-4c/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

you're not even quite sure how to explain it. Something happened and you're not sure people will even believe you when you tell them about it. Something happened and you're not even sure yet what kind of happening it is.

The angel, Gabriel, told Mary what would happen and she responded, not with a lack of faith but with the kind of wondering that God favours and honours. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And here is where we find out that the shadow of the Most High is a different kind of shadow… The shadow of the Most High is not the shadow of death, but the shadow of life. "The Holy Spirit will come on you," Gabriel said, "and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

The shadow of the Most High is the shadow of life. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary… perhaps not unlike the way that the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters at the dawn of creation (Genesis 1:2)… perhaps not unlike the way that the wings of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant overshadowed the cover of the ark of the covenant and its contents (1 Kings 8:7). And within that overshadowing, Mary conceived, and within her womb the Son of God was formed. And his name was Jesus. He was formed in Mary (just like you and I were formed in the wombs of our mothers), was born of Mary, and then grew in wisdom and stature and favour with God and man (Luke 2:52). And he continued the earthly ministry of God… extending mercy to all the generations (v. 50), lifting up the humble (v. 52), and filling the hungry with good things (v. 53). And those (then and now – even us) who have been overshadowed by God in ways that have felt like scattering and bringing down and empty-handedness… perhaps we are exactly now in a place to receive from him, and not from ourselves, the great things that the Mighty One does for us.

And what was Mary's place in all of this?



She was God's servant who said yes. She was God's servant who said, Amen. She was God's servant who said, May it be to me as you have said. **"She brings nothing on her resume other than her availability and willingness to serve. But those characteristics are the most basic ones anyone can offer God.** SO he puts her to use in his plan, taking her through a process for which she has had no training or preparation. He simply promises to be with her in the journey, and she responds by being willing to go on the ride" (Darrell Bock, NIV Application Commentary, p. 59).

The Most High is an overshadower. And the shadow of the Most High is not a shadow of death, but a shadow of life.

God overshadows you and forms Christ within you. And as you say yes to him and say Amen to him and say May it be to me as you have said, you become a part of his shadow… You are your heavenly father's little shadow… both in that you follow him wherever he goes, but also in that (when you are in him and he is in you) the shadow of your life falls across people in ways that bring life.

This word for overshadowing in Luke 1 is used only a few more times in the New Testament. A few of the times are associated with the mountain of transfiguration, when the cloud comes and overshadows Jesus, but you know what I was most fascinated by? There is a story in Acts 5. "People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least

Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. [16] Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed." A little strange, but what if you thought of your shadow, your footprint, your presence as a shadow of life over this broken world… a shadow that brings life. Is that not what you have been created and redeemed for? To be overshadowed by the love and life of God and to overshadow others with that same love and life?