

Advent 4 2014

Luke 1: 26-38

Two weeks ago I celebrated the holy day mass of Immaculate Conception at Seton High School. I stood on stage before five-hundred expectant girls. I felt like Joshua inspecting the ranks of the Israelite army. The gospel, like today, was the annunciation story, and I had prepared very carefully. But after the opening greeting, seized by inspiration, or brainless impulse, I said, “Never before have I been in a room with so many beautiful young women.” Five hundred heads turned to comment and titter; a roar swept across the room. I imagined teachers grimacing, annoyed that I had let things go out of control. I waited and began the gloria. Thinking on my feet (usually beyond me), I realized that the opening gaffe fit my first homily point. I was speaking to girls approximately the age of Blessed Mary when the angel came, at least the freshmen. I wanted them to see the angel’s message was also meant for them, however unlikely that seems. Through his messenger, God is saying four things: you are special; I give you a task that you alone can do; it will be difficult and you will struggle; but if you persevere, you will give life to the world (in various forms), and you will find joy.

Back to the danger zone, which for me is never far away. My contemporary illustration for making these points was the slightly racy movie *Stage Beauty*. Set in 1660, it tells the story of Edward Kynaston, a stage-actor of pop-star celebrity. The dramatic twist is that, because Renaissance theater had male-only casts, Kynaston was played only female roles. He was famous for his Desdemona, the innocent wife killed by Othello. All London turned up to see him die. *Until* a young woman, Mariah Hughes, gets fed up with the artificial histrionics by which he pleads and faints away. She begins playing Desdemona in underground theaters, until Kynaston’s performance becomes a thing of the past. I hoped that Seton students would identify with Mariah, brave feminist pioneer. That they could make the connection with the Virgin Mary who also entered unexplored territory.

Today I stand before listeners who (for the most part) are *not* beautiful young women setting out on the adventure journey of life with glorious commissions from the Lord of hosts. Speaking for myself, I hear the annunciation story as someone old and tired and with my spring freshness behind me. If this is true for you, we are being challenged to find deeper truths, below the surface, in this story of a girl who hears and answers God’s unique call.

I wonder whether annunciation lessons may be learned from the other hero, the anti-hero, of *Stage Beauty*, Edward Kynaston, who must surrender center-stage to the new order. We might consider the bitterness and disorientation he feels during the transition.

He learns four things: your accomplishment is a mixture of strength and weakness; you are now losing the celebrity you once enjoyed; this will be difficult and painful; but—but what? Those who have followed the earlier stories of the Advent season will recognize parallels with the story of John the Baptist, the child of promise and desert prophet of blazing celebrity. There is something sad about his gradual fade-out, the messengers he sends to find if Jesus *is* the one to come, disciples leaving him to follow Jesus, and his tragically violent end. This seems a gloomy prototype for us who live past our prime.

In the movie, Mariah has trouble learning how to play a woman on stage. She tries to imitate Kynaston's gestures. This does not work, but she determines to learn from him anyway. Finally, after some experimenting, conflict, and back-and-forth, she explodes at him. "I hate the way you let Desdemona die. No woman would die like that. She would fight!" This forces Kynaston, as partner, to strangle as if he meant it. He must leave his languishing ways and learn something new. This letting-go we must do for the next generation, if we are going to leave a positive legacy. The public enactment of this struggle by Edward and Mariah is a triumph. The audience feels terror. Mariah wins the applause, but she needs Kynaston to accomplish this. The young need the old to make their mark. The learning is mutual. The humility Kynaston needs to play Othello when he has always played Desdemona is in its quiet, unspectacular way, a triumph. Any awkward and painful transition we accomplish in life, is, for Christians, foreshadowed and illumined by the paschal mystery—that close connection between death and resurrection. In life, the connection is always accompanied by struggle and anguish. As Mary found in Bethlehem, there is loneliness and labor as the old order gives way to the new. We find this in our own lives too.

But--there is reward. The movie conveys this in the minor character of Samuel Pepys. (He is played by the actor who is Lord Grantham on *Downton Abbey*.) Pepys wrote the longest, funniest, greatest diary in the English language—it has its racy moments too. During *Stage Beauty*, in his frock coat and long curly wig he is on the edge of many scenes scribbling away on scraps of paper. It is very annoying. Mariah finally says, "What *are* you doing?" "Taking notes for my diary." "Do you enjoy that?" she asks. "I love it," he answers. His face is radiant. "Do

you enjoy your acting?" She doesn't answer. She is not *there* yet. But it is certain that by effort and struggle she will arrive. She will experience the ecstasy of growing into the role that only she can fill, and by which she brings life into the world.

It is a pathetically poor imitation of the spiritual reality, this spicy, second-rate movie, *Stage Beauty*. But if it helps you ponder and experience the great mystery which we call incarnation, it serves its purpose. Without Mary, Christ could not leave heaven and come to earth. Without her parents becoming obsolete, she could not consent to and fulfill her role. All the world is a stage; we are the players. We must find new roles in the drama of salvation history when we outgrow our old ones.

Gabriel Myers, OSB