

## A Feast in the Midst of a Fast: The Annunciation of Our Lord

I've written and taught over the past several years about the importance of fasting and learning to restrain our urges/desires in the Christian life, especially in a season of purification such as Lent. One of the biblical touchpoints I emphasize is that fasting exists as a counterpart to feasting, and feasting to fasting. Both are part of the Christian life; both are exhibited in the life of Jesus. The crucifixion is our daily baptismal reality, as is the glorious resurrection of our Lord. We are baptized into both and therefore, seek to put to death the mortal sinful flesh and live in the newness of the life Christ gives through the Spirit.

Every March 25, the Church recognizes an important day in the liturgical year. The Annunciation of Our Lord. It may be you know this. It may be you vaguely recall hearing about it. But most people, even faithful worshippers, are hard-pressed to know its significance. This in part is due to poor instruction by pastors, but also due to the time of year this feast occurs— smack dab during the season of Lent! Here we are trying to fast, and reflect, and live repentant lives...and we have this day of feasting right in the midst of it. For us at St. Paul's, due to our size, we very rarely have the opportunity to observe feast days on the days themselves. So, this Church holy day might come and go, and if it's not on a Sunday, very little is said about it.

But this year, The Annunciation of Our Lord falls on a Wednesday. Because we traditionally set aside Wednesdays in Lent to worship, it's natural that we take this opportunity to observe this important feast day. Which we will. But allow me to provide a little more background on why the Annunciation is an important holiday, and why we should unabashedly celebrate it.

First of all, unlike some lesser commemorations or saint days, this feast is rooted in the Scriptural narrative of the birth of our Lord. So, it's biblical, thoroughly so. The text for the Annunciation is Luke 1:26-38. It should be quite familiar, for it's also the reading for the last Sunday in Advent, leading into the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas Day). I have also focused on it in a number of ways, both in preaching and writing. It is a familiar scene to most any Christian. The angel Gabriel comes and "announces" to Mary that she is most highly favored, and has been chosen to conceive and bear the One who will be called "son of the Most High." But what's implied in this holy interaction is that the moment of conception, by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the blessed Virgin, occurs *in the very announcement of this promise*. Jesus was conceived "in the ear" as Luther put it. That is, when Mary heard the promise and believed it, the eternal Son of God was conceived and became incarnate. We rightly celebrate the birth of the Savior on Christmas, but His enfleshment began with the Annunciation.

But another reason for the importance of this day is the actual calendar date, March 25. Perhaps that date has a symmetrical ring, but you can't quite put your finger as to why. Let me connect some dots. In the ancient world, it was a widespread belief that great men, holy men, prophets...*were born and died on the same calendar date*. It was thought to be a sign of "perfection," that their lives had a completeness to them. In reckoning the events of the life of our Lord Jesus, this belief is why the date of March 25 was selected. But this is more than a kind

of mystical flight of fancy. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ were historical happenings. Not mythological, but utterly historical. He lived and died in time and space. One of the viable dates for the crucifixion of Jesus, using the Scriptural record as well as secondary resources, is March 25. As early as the late second century, the Church began associating this calendar date *with both events*. The Philocalian Calendar, established in 354 AD, lists the Annunciation as March 25. It also referenced other dates in the Christian Year, such as December 25 for the Nativity (Birth) of Our Lord. The Annunciation was formally and liturgically recognized by the councils of Toledo and Constantinople in the seventh century.

Which brings me to the third important reason why we should fully embrace this day with more reverence and festivity—*the date of the Annunciation is the likely basis for our date for Christmas*. This is where your symmetrical synopsis should be firing. We presume that Mary carried Jesus to full term, which is nine months. We are not told exactly when she bore the Savior, just that “while they were [in Bethlehem], the time came for her to give birth.” Why were they in Bethlehem? Well, you know. To register to pay taxes. When would this registration take place? Likely in the first month of the new year. What was the first month of the ancient Roman Calendar? You guessed it—Ianuarus, or January. So, the ancient Christians likely associated December 25 with the birth of Jesus, but not due to some competing pagan winter solstice celebration, but *because it was nine months from His conception*. So, the conception and the birth of Jesus were linked through reverent calculation at the earliest dates. Hippolytus of Rome mentions the date of Christmas as December 25 in 202 AD. The Annunciation was likely already in place as a day of great significance. We have the opportunity every year to reflect on the full biblical witness of the incarnation by observing not just the Nativity of Our Lord, but His very conception, the moment when the Second Person of the Triune God took on human nature and began to dwell in the ark of Mary’s womb.

There is also a contemporary importance of the Annunciation for us. God reminds us in it that He is a God of life, and not of death. While sin had to be atoned for through the shedding of blood, that blood came from true God, true man, He Who was truly innocent of all sin, Who lived an “indestructible life” (Heb 7:16). What is more, Jesus shares our nature with us, knows of our weakness, and even what it’s like to live in a world full of sin. But God doesn’t save through a ritual culture of death, as most pagan religions promote, but through life...and not any life. His Son enters into humanity as an embryo, a child in the womb. This should give us pause, as we live in world that tries to marginalize and extinguish the life of the unborn. Even Christians easily buy into the lies of those preoccupied with promoting ideologies that would relegate the unborn as secondary humans, or exalt the mother’s life as supreme over the life of a child in the womb. The Annunciation of Our Lord forces us to contend with the fact that God saved *through the miracle of childbirth*, and that conception is the beginning of life of all, including that of Jesus. God sent His Son into the world not as a fully-formed man, but as a tiny embryo in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God conquers death through death...and life. And it starts with the conception of Christ.

So, my invitation to you: in the midst of a season of fasting and repentance, come to the feast and hear the Gospel of Luke afresh. Marvel at how God deemed to redeem His creation and fallen mankind. Receive the Eucharist on that day to partake of the very Body and Blood of our Lord. Come on March 25 to more deeply meditate on just how much God loves humanity that He would send His Son *to live every single aspect of it* without sin. This day rightly calls us to repentance for how we've marginalized the unborn in our modern notions of "rights" and "freedom." Receive the full teaching that the Scriptures and Church Year have to give you.