

July 19th: Good News

Again, welcome to this new summer series—this will be a time of year when we take a break from our more traditional sermon series to explore more creative ways of engaging with God and growing in our faith. This is an opportunity to expand our spiritual journey by deepening our curiosity and trying new things, so I hope that this season will give you a new perspective or fresh insight.

The practice that we are entering into each week is called Visio Divina—which is similar to a practice called Lectio Divina. In that practice, a passage of scripture is read multiple times, each time paying attention to a word or phrase through which God might speak. Visio Divina is similar in the sense that it invites us into prolonged attention and introspection, but the object of our devotion is different. We will hear scripture passages each week that relate to the theme of the day, but our practice will center on a piece of artwork that we will reflect on together. This art will be from a variety of mediums, cultures, and time periods, all with the goal of using our visual sense to learn something new or receive new wisdom.

I will first offer a brief reflection on our piece for today, and then I will invite us to begin our practice. Whether you are new to Visio Divina or you've practiced it before, I will offer some additional instructions and potential questions to consider—but you are welcome to engage in any way that makes sense for you.

As we get started, please join me in a quick word of prayer.

Emmanuel, God with us, you are our good news. Your presence with us is the gospel that our hearts are longing for this morning. We worship you because you offer us hope in our most difficult moments, you give us light in the darkness. When we are afraid, you promise us joy. When we are lost, you promise us peace. Help us to receive the gift of your love and grace today, as we invite you into our hearts and into our lives. Amen.

In my family, we have a pattern. When checking in about our days or updating each other on our lives, we often ask, “Do you want the good news, or the bad news?” I always ask for the bad news first, no matter how bad it is, just to get it over with. It’s like my brain needs to digest all the negative outcomes and possibilities before it can even grasp what might be positive or exciting. I can’t even begin to celebrate until I’ve processed the bad. Maybe you’re like me, or maybe you’re the opposite—you always want the good news first—it helps you shake off whatever might be not so good.

Right now, there’s not a lot of good news in our world, we seem to be overwhelmed by grisly news stories and reports of various wars, and violence in our communities. That is very real, but this morning, I want us to intentionally make space for what God might be doing behind the scenes—the beautiful, glorious, transcendent work that we might be tempted to dismiss or ignore.

So to guide us, I have an image to share with you. In case you’ve never seen or heard of this piece of art before, let me introduce you to some helpful history.

This piece is called, “The Annunciation,” and it is a fresco completed by the early Renaissance painter Fra Angelico, a Dominican friar and painter in 15th century Florence. In 1440, Fra Angelico was approached by Cosimo de Medici, a wealthy banker and politician, to decorate the recently rebuilt Convent of San Marco with religious art that would attune the soul to the truth and narrative beauty of the Bible. Over the course of five years, Fra Angelico would complete numerous pieces inside the convent, including an altarpiece, several cloisters, the chapter house and more—adding up to more than 50 frescos.

The reason that this process took so long has something to do with the inherent difficulty of this medium—frescos are not like other paintings that are done on wood or canvas and then framed—they are literally fused onto walls themselves. In this artistic technique, pigment is applied to wet plaster, and as the plaster dries, the pigment chemically binds together with the wall. Because this process required painters to be quite precise, they often moved slowly,

only tackling a small section of the overall scene at a time—known as a “giornata,” or “day's work.” Any mistakes would require that a section of the plaster needed to be removed, and then repainted the next day. Pieces could take weeks, if not months to complete to the satisfaction of both the artist and the benefactor. It's certainly a fussy way to create art, but it also is worth the effort—many of these original frescos have stood the test of time because they can not be easily removed or relocated. The Annunciation remains in its original home to this day—a constant presence in the city where the Renaissance began.

Here's what makes this particular fresco interesting from an art history perspective.

This particular fresco was not the first time that Fra Angelico had painted this scene, but he is credited with inventing this specific archetype—meaning before this piece debuted, annunciation imagery looked pretty different. Typically, in previous eras, this scene featured a very regal Mary, seated on a throne indoors, while the angel Gabriel appeared to float into view. The lack of spatial awareness and realistic perspective meant that figures sometimes looked a little unmoored, while these figures in Fra Angelico's version seem firmly anchored in place. In this interpretation of that passage that we are going to revisit in just a minute, Mary is seated outdoors in a simple cloister with minimal adornments or decorations. We get a clear view into this intimate and personal introduction between a heavenly angel and the future mother of Jesus, we can see how close they are to touching—the good news of the divine comes right up close to our human reality. There's nothing to draw our attention away from this prophetic moment, all of our eyes are drawn into the space where God's message of hope and coming salvation will be shared. The Roman columns frame it perfectly—we join in to receive the news that our Messiah is on the way. An inscription along bottom reminded the residents of the convent to pray as they passed, praising God for this ultimate miracle.

Because this fresco took so long to create, I often wonder if Fra Angelico meditated on this scene from Luke 1 as he worked. He was a priest, after all!

I wonder if, as his paintbrush grazed the wet plaster, he recalled how this angel came to a small village in Galilee, where a young woman named Mary was pledged in marriage to a man named Joseph, who came from the line of King David, Israel's great monarch. As he sketched and waited for pigments to dry, I wonder if he remembered the angel's words: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

I wonder if he shared Mary's initial anxiety about such an impossible encounter, and if he heard the powerful truth of this message that was given to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." I wonder if he felt the same joy and devotion as Mary when she replied, "I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled."

If he did engage with this familiar story as he worked—what was revealed to him as he prayed? Was he filled with happiness and contentment? What divine truth did he receive that he tried to weave into this fresco?

And as we engage with this image, what good news might be in store for us? How might we encounter God within this fresco and this text? What might the voice of God be communicating to you, as he comes into your heart and mind? What joy is waiting for you?

That is my question for all of us, today. Our task is to listen for good news.

To prepare, let me frame our practice. In just a few moments, I will invite us into sacred silence, and for about 5 minutes, we will engage with this painting and this story. As you entered this morning, you might have received a piece of paper with the four stages of Visio Divina, but I will also describe them for you now.

First, I invite you to Gaze at the painting on the screen. Look slowly and thoroughly, taking a first glance, noting the colors, movement, textures, people, places and things. This is simply a preliminary step, as you allow your soul to open and interact with the image.

Second, when you are ready, you can enter a time of Reflection. This is a deeper look, meant to engage your imagination. How does this image inform or illuminate your relationship with God? How does it speak to your spiritual journey?

Third, when you've had a chance to reflect, you can start to Respond with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Did it open a new awareness, or spark a conviction? Offer that prayer to God.

And finally, the last step is to Rest. Sit with the painting again. Notice how God's presence is with you in this space of relaxation and refreshment. How will you take this sense of peace into the rest of your day? Remember: Gaze, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. Or simply take these moments to breathe deep before the busy week ahead. It's up to you.

Now, settle into your chair, take a second to push away any distractions, and focus on this encounter. You may begin.

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Thank you, my friends. I hope that this time of reflection brought you deeper into the presence of God and closer to the good news that God has for you and your life. May it bless you this week.

Amen.