

**Sunday 24 December 2023, Advent 4**

**Luke 1.26-38**

**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

How many times do you think you've heard the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary? Five times? Fifteen times? Fifty times? I reckon I've heard it at least 90 times. That's once a year at Morning or Evening Prayer, once at a eucharist, and once at a Carol Service. Three times a year for 30 years (assuming I don't remember much before age 7). Not all of you will have 30 years of Luke chapter 1 under your belt, but some of you will have even more. How do we respond to something that we hear so frequently? An even better question: how do I as preacher show you something new and amazing in a passage that you may have heard preached every year for decades?

When I asked myself these questions, I felt a bit overwhelmed. I felt I needed to make it interesting, to make it fresh, to make it exciting. But how?! Then I realised something. I don't need to make the Annunciation interesting, fresh, and exciting. I don't need to \*make\* it good for you. Because it is inherently good. And it's inherently good in the same way as something we all experience, at least I hope we do, every day.

Can you remember the last time someone said 'I love you' to you? Perhaps it was this morning. Or last night before you went to sleep. How many times do you think you've heard someone special say 'I love you'? Five times? Fifteen times? Fifty times? Five hundred times? I don't think I could count how many times my parents and grandparents said 'I love you'. And I admit that I wasn't stopped short in amazement or captured by the beauty of it every single time. But I did appreciate it. And I do appreciate it. In fact, it means more to me than probably anything else I can think of.

Familiarity and repetition have not robbed 'I love you' of its meaning and, even when I get used to hearing it, I know I would miss hearing it if it stopped. And my life would be diminished by the absence of it. That small phrase, those three little words (as we call them), may be the most important words ever spoken to me. And I don't ever want to be without those words in my life. I want to suggest that the story of Gabriel appearing to Mary bringing the message of her conception and the birth of a son named Jesus is one of the Bible's 'I love you' moments. It's a moment in which we hear with almost deafening clarity the declaration of God that he loves us. He loves you. And me.

*You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.* This unexpected but long-prophesied announcement tells us that God loves us. It tells us that he loved us from the beginning in the Garden of Eden: the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head. It tells us that he loved us in ancient time and arranged the kingship of Israel so as to provide a great ancestor for Jesus: *I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have*

*anointed him. It tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

I don't need to make 'I love you' fresh and exciting because it is fresh and exciting. Even when it isn't. That's the curious thing about 'I love you': it's always meaningful even when we take it for granted. It's beautiful even when we fail to hear it. It sustains us even when we dismiss it. I know you know this, because you know what it would be like never to hear it again. You would suffer for lack of 'I love you', even if a moment before you had taken it for granted.

My friends, the angel Gabriel came to Mary to tell you that God loves you. And we read this story again and again because one can never hear 'I love you' enough. And that's especially true when it comes from God because, unlike our human relations, his love never fails. His love never fades. It is never grudgingly given. His 'I love you' is never casual. And though we may sometimes feel that we do not love him, he never stops loving us. Though we may sometimes feel that he doesn't love us, we have such tangible proof of his love that it cannot be denied. For we have his only-begotten Son, Jesus, who loved us so much that he died to take away our sins and reconcile us to the Father and to each other.

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

God's 'I love you' in the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary is one of his loudest 'I love you's. It is an 'I love you' that brings eternal life. It is worth hearing about again and again and again. Five hundred thousand times would be too small a number for this 'I love you': *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'* Amen.