SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 4 (B)
December 20, 2026

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Canticle 3 or Canticle 15 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Wind & Hail

Picture this: A wilderness. A blowing wind. And a tent, its panels pressed taut by the fierce, invisible currents which embrace, and threaten, and make music through open seams and frayed edges.

If you have ever tent-camped in a desert, this is a space easy to imagine: the rippling, sun-soaked fabric; the sense of being sheltered, but only just, against the looming vastness.

But even if you have never been in such a place, you have been. You have been where the wild wind bears down upon your life. You have rested against the thin veil that hangs between yourself and everything. And in such a space, even if you did not know it, you were in the territory of *annunciation*.

"Annunciation" is the word most associated with today's gospel passage. It is the label given to this strange exchange between Gabriel and Mary—and the breath of God, who is whispering, pleading, promising in the pregnant silences. But, like many of the names and labels given to holy moments, we might fail to hear the fullness of what "annunciation" is, or what it could mean for us.

So let us listen closely.

Greetings, says the angel. Or as the old translations say, *hail*. Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you. And these words do tumble down upon Mary like literal hail, like ice crystals on that wild wind. They sting, these words. They awaken her to herself and to the One who has come to melt and meld with her flesh and with all flesh.

The Lord is with you. With you as a child, if you will bear him.

A shocking greeting, indeed. Inconceivable, this conception. It is far less serene than the cozy depictions we've given it. Art has typically imagined the Annunciation indoors, in a pleasant domestic shelter with solid walls and mild, downcast gazes. God has come knocking, politely.

But when has that ever been true?

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Perhaps, instead, like most divine encounters in this life, it was actually done in a wilderness, out in some empty, breeze-blown place where Mary dared to go. Perhaps she was hungry, like a traveler—hungry for something she could not name—and she went out beyond the Nazarene walls she knew, and she discovered, as we often do, that God likes to find us in the places where we are only half-comforted.

Hail, half-comforted one. The Lord is with you.

This would make more sense, because this is how it has always been with God. We do not know why, but all annunciations will likely take place somewhere less than placid.

And this brings us back to the tent.

To understand the nature of Mary's annunciation, and our own, one can look all the way back to God's early interactions with the children of Israel. As recalled today in the second book of Samuel, the prophet Nathan gives King David a divine rebuke of sorts. David, meaning well, thinks the Lord should have a dwelling place at least as nice as his own. And so he envisions building a dwelling place for God with strong cedar walls and fine furnishings.

And yet the words, like hailstones, come. Stinging and awakening. *I have not lived in a house*, says God. Did I ever speak a word asking for one? No, I did not. Not once.

For I am the God of tents and tabernacles and wilderness roads. I am the God who does not settle in but who dances lithely down the freedom road. Never forget: Liberation is the language I am teaching you. Do not make the mistake of speaking to me in more complacent tongues.

No, says God. Learn from your ancestor Moses, who came into the tent of meeting outside the camp and received, there, his annunciations.

Every true word that comes from God will be given to you, not in cedar palaces, but in the times and places where the veil is thin between yourself and everything else. Every true word will come to you as an embrace and as a threat. It will come to make music through the open seams in your soul and the frayed edges of your heart.

Hail, half-comforted one. The Lord is with you.

We must come to understand: Annunciations are not mere announcements of information from God, but invitations to a radical and mutual exchange between us and God. And, following in the footsteps of Moses, and David, and all the wise ones who came before her, Mary's annunciation is the most radical and the most mutual of all.

For it can be said that in her response to the angel—*yes, here am I*—Mary consented to the human body itself being a tent of meeting through which the wild God-wind blows. The conception of Jesus is the beginning of God's fierce and invisible currents moving not just around us but within us, so that, in our own lives, we might be the bearers of a thousand proclamations of grace.

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Because if we are in Christ, and Christ is in us, then we now carry inside ourselves the wilderness and the wind; the embrace and the threat; the heavenly music and the torn veil. This annunciation is not a painting on the wall but the very life we live. That language of liberation is our native tongue now, no matter which dialect we speak out loud.

And, to be honest, this is a lot for anyone to consider. Mary was perplexed by the words and by the gift, and, quite often, so are we. Annunciations are not for the faint of heart. This is why most of us have made peace with comfortable houses and sturdy walls to keep the wind out.

But Advent will not permit it, friends. This dark and holy time through which we have been moving together is tent-of-meeting season. Advent will not countenance the cedar plank and the tightly shut door; it rejects the ongoing domestication of God's arrival in our midst. It is the time when we become hungry like travelers, driven out to breeze-blown places, looking for the One who whispers to the half-comforted. It is the time when we, too, dare to imagine our own lives as a place of annunciation, and when we say: *Come, Lord Jesus. Let it be with me according to your word.*

What is it that you are hungry for? What would you go out beyond the walls to find? What annunciation would make your soul tremble with fullness, pressed taut against the fierce and invisible currents? It is worth trying to know these things and it is even more worthwhile to pursue them. Because, like it was for Mary, an annunciation only becomes something if you say yes, whatever the cost.

And the good news is this: the more of us who do say *yes* to God and to the angels who come with their devastating gifts, then the more opportunities Christ will have to be born anew right here and right now. Which, it just so happens, is exactly where he desires to be: to plead and to promise; to embrace and to threaten; and to dance lithely in the direction of our freedom.

And when he does, if you let him, then this is the song he will sing, as it has always been:

Hail, half-comforted one. The Lord is with you.

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