

Rare alignment: The annunciation and Good Friday falling on the same day

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

One of my desk drawers is filled with old calendars, which I've been saving as a prop for a faulty memory. I suspect it's a fruitless exercise. Appointments and to-do lists, however necessary, don't add up to a life, and the dates that really do matter return like faithful comets. Among the fairest of all these periodic messengers is March 25, the ancient and universal feast of the annunciation, or Lady Day, as it used to be called. It commemorates the first instant of the incarnation, when the angelic greeting met the maiden's consent. Everything changed in that instant, as the fifth-century pope Leo the Great observed in a letter to the bishop of Constantinople.

Beyond our grasp, he chose to come within our grasp. Existing before time began, he began to exist at a moment in time. Lord of the universe, he hid his infinite glory and took the nature of a servant. Incapable of suffering as God, he did not refuse to be a man, capable of suffering. Immortal, he chose to be subject to the laws of death.

In that instant, the world began again. Therefore for many centuries—until as recently as 1752—England and the colonies kept New Year's day on March 25. Following the same tradition, J. R. R. Tolkien made March 25 the day on which the One Ring was destroyed, and had Gandalf tell Frodo, "The New Year will always now begin upon the twenty-fifth of March when Sauron fell, and when you were brought out of the fire to the King."

This year, Good Friday falls on March 25, bringing the movable day of the Passion and the fixed day of the annunciation into a rare alignment—the sort of cosmic convergence that sends wizards running to check their astrolabes. According to various patristic and medieval accounts, March 25 was the original date not only of Christ's conception but also of Adam's creation, the fall and the crucifixion (and

even, some say, of Abraham's sacrifice and the Exodus from Egypt). The rationale for this chronology is not pseudo-history, but Christ-centered typology. If we read the Bible the way our ancestors did, as a unified story of divine making and remaking, of human exile and return, then March 25 is its pivot. In Adam we are created and die, and in the second Adam we are re-created and live. From the first Eve we learn to say no to the divine plan, and from the second Eve we learn to say yes. Every great holy day recapitulates this story from its particular vantage point in the Christian year, yet perhaps never so impressively as when Good Friday falls on its "original" date, and the end of Christ's story rejoins its beginning.

When Good Friday and the annunciation coincided in 970, it took the Benedictine level-headedness of Abbo of Fleury to defuse the end-time rumors. The same conjunction prompted John Donne to write his decidedly nonapocalyptic "Upon the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day, 1608" as an exercise in christological poetics, wedding the old biblical typologies to newer allegorical conceits.

There is a paradox, Donne admits, in observing the annunciation and the Passion, both feast and fast, on the same day. But this "doubtful day" shows us that the conception and death of Christ comprise a single divine act: the Son's descent from heaven to the womb, from the womb to the cross, from the cross to the abyss of death, all for love.

This Church, by letting those days join, hath shown
Death and conception in mankind is one;
Or 'twas in Him the same humility,
That He would be a man, and leave to be;

So in Christ's mother, love and grief are one:

At once a Son is promised her, and gone;
Gabriell gives Christ to her, He her to John;
Not fully a mother, She's in orbity [bereavement];
At once receiver and the legacy.

Christ died not once, but twice, Donne suggests, passing through nonbeing to life at the annunciation and passing through death to life at the Passion, lighting up the

corridors of death as he passed through them, and joining his beginning to his end:

All this, and all between, this day hath shown,
Th' abridgement of Christ's story, which makes one—
As in plain maps, the furthest west is east—
Of th' angels *Ave*, and *Consummatum est*.

One may object that Donne is building an elaborate conceit upon the mere artifact of an ecclesiastical calendar. But Donne sees nothing arbitrary in it. There is a wisdom in the convergence of the two days, and a wisdom in their distinctness too:

How well the Church, God's Court of Faculties
Deals, in sometimes, and seldom joining these!

Though the mysteries of March are always available for contemplation, this peculiar calendrical occurrence is a rare invitation—not to be repeated until the cycle comes round again in 2016—to step within the church's circling year and meet the infant, crucified and risen Lord.