

Baser things and better things (Luke 1:26-38)

The annunciation is a story about a woman bearing forth the better things from the baser.

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Sometimes my Greek Orthodox fiancé tells me stories I've never heard before. Now, any time I think of the annunciation in Luke 1, I remember the ninth-century hymnodist Kassiani and her suitor's terrible pickup line.

"Through a woman came the baser things," the emperor Theodorus told Kassiani, talking about Eve and the curse. She immediately rebuffed him: "and through a woman came the better things." Kassiani remembered Mary, and her motherhood of Christ. Theodorus never forgot this, allegedly remaining in love with Kassiani forever.

Seven centuries prior, Nazareth was a city through which came the baser things. In John 1, when Nathanael first hears about Jesus, he exclaims, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" In the world's economy, Nazareth itself has nothing to offer. God, however, doesn't assign value the way we so often do. There is a place in God's economy for places and people the world dismisses as having nothing to contribute to our collective life: Nazareth and pregnant teenagers and female musicians in the ninth century turning down a shot at marrying the emperor. The annunciation is a story about a woman bearing forth the better things from the baser.

In Nazareth today, pilgrims still gather at the Basilica of the Annunciation. Recently I stood in a side chapel as a Greek Orthodox priest began to lead prayers. Before I knew it, dozens upon dozens of pilgrims from Greece had surrounded me, intermixed with unsuspecting Roman Catholics from Scotland. Everyone was pressing in on me, talking in languages I don't know. The priest mumbled. No angel announced anything unto us.

And then the Kyrie began, the crowd shouting every word we knew like we had front row seats to the Eras tour. A nonagenarian behind me couldn't see, so others switched places to accommodate her, boosting her closer to the priest.

Some say that tourists take away from the sacredness of a holy place. We often visit sites of God's mercy expecting them to look sacred: some picture naves empty yet full of incense; some picture endless untouched wilderness. We sometimes hope to meet God in a sophisticated pilgrim way, not like those tourists covered in sunscreen and wonder. We want to avoid the baser things.

But through the baser things come the better: Christ's human flesh came from dusty Nazareth, and unwed Mary, and sinful Eve. In God's economy, teenage girls and tourists only hallow holy ground.