

SUMMARY

Theme: "Tell God I say 'yes'"

Readings

Luke	1:18-23	Zechariah & Elizabeth's child <i>as Call to worship</i>
Luke	1:26-38	The Annunciation
Luke	1:47-55	Magnificat

Hymns

StF	H&P		CCLI
171	82	Hark the glad sound	yes
187	87	The angel Gabriel from heaven came.	yes
186	86	Tell out my soul	yes
181	79	Of the Father's love begotten	yes
94	463	To God be the glory	yes

Resources

Videos

Sermon
Children's talk

Pictures associated with sermon

[A traditional representation of the Annunciation](#) by Fra Angelico, 1435.
[Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner](#), 1898.

Call to worship

The theme of our service today is the Annunciation, or rather two annunciations; the first made to Zechariah, about the child who was to become John the Baptist; and the second to Mary. Zechariah doubted the possibility, but Mary was full of faith. Let us hear how it happened.

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and

not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Luke 1:18-22

[HYMN StF 171, H&P 82: Hark the glad sound](#)

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|---|---|
| 1 Hark the glad sound ! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long ;
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song. | 3 He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor. |
| 2 He comes the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held ;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield. | 4 Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name. |

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)

Prayer of Approach

Lord, look upon us, we, the people of Basingstoke and Reading Circuit, scattered in various churches and many homes, but united in prayer and fellowship. Look upon each and every one of us; you know us through and through, and you know that we are sinners. In the quiet now, we bring our sins before you, and we lay them down. Take them from us, we pray, and forgive us. Help us to do better in future.

Lord, in our prayers today, we think of Mary, who was humble but rose to a great challenge, a girl who wanted to be married, who never imagined what she would be called to as a mother.

As Mary heard God's call, and accepted it, let us too stand and be ready to serve in whatever role God asks of us. We ask that we may have her simplicity of heart, that does not quibble, or give ifs and buts, but simply accepts. We pray that we, too, may hear your call, and no matter what you call us to, sense it, so that we may understand it for what it is.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Junior Church

A video accompanies this script.

HYMN StF 187, H&P 87 The angel Gabriel from heaven came.

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| 1 The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame ;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria ! | 3 Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name : '
most highly favoured lady.
Gloria ! |
| 2 'For known a blessèd Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold ;
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria ! | 4 Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
'Most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria ! |

Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924)

Readings

Luke 1:26-38

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour 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."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called ^a the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:46-55 (KJV)

⁴⁶ And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,

⁴⁷ And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

⁴⁸ For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

⁴⁹ For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

⁵³ He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

⁵⁴ He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

⁵⁵ As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

HYMN StF 186, H&P 86 Tell out my soul

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| 1 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord !
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice ;
tender to me the promise of his word ;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice. | 3 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might !
Powers and dominions lay their glory by ;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high. |
| 2 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name !
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has
done ;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same ;
his holy name — the Lord, the Mighty One. | 4 Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word !
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore ! |

Timothy Dudley-Smith (*b.* 1926)

Based on the *Magnificat*

Sermon

No wind at the window,
No knock on the door;
No light from the lampstand
No foot on the floor; no dream born of tiredness,
No ghost raised by fear:
Just an angel and a woman
And a voice in her ear.

“Oh Mary, oh Mary,
Don't hide from my face.
Be glad that you're favoured
And filled with God's grace.
The time for redeeming
The world has begun;
And you are requested
To mother God's son.”

“This child must be born
That the kingdom might come:

Salvation for many,
Destruction for some;
Both end and beginning,
Both message and sign;
Both victor and victim,
Both yours and divine.”

No payment was promised,
No promises made;
No wedding was dated,
No blueprint displayed.
Yet Mary, consenting
To what none could guess,
Replied with conviction,
“Tell God I say yes”.

Zechariah, as we heard in the reading right at the beginning of this service, failed a test; he did not accept the angel’s forecast of a son, because it seemed to him an improbable wild idea when he and his wife Elizabeth were already old. Mary, too, was perplexed: how could she have a child when she was still a virgin? But the evidence of Elizabeth’s pregnancy was laid before her, and she accepted it and rose to the challenge. So Mary passed the test of faith which Zechariah had failed.

Probably, we all wonder what the Annunciation was like. Was it as shown in the many pictures that we find on Christmas cards of the angel approaching Mary? They are often by some of the greatest old masters, and the aim of the artist above all seems to be to show the holiness and perfection of both Mary and the angel. Rich clothes, golden haloes and (in the angel’s case) golden wings emphasize the point. The action often takes place in an architectural setting which is formal and classical.

More modern pictures are sometimes much more free, and we would say, more realistic. A famous picture by Henry Ossawa Tanner¹ shows the angel as a baffling streak of light in Mary’s homely bedroom. This is very interesting; what is it actually like to encounter an angel? Is the angel purely a mental reality, a winged message that hits you out of the blue, or is it distinctly a person whom you might touch? And, if an angel is a person, is he or she a beautiful heavenly creation, or just a somebody-or-other on an errand?

I think that in trying to imagine the situation of Mary, we should use the model that seems the most convincing to us. The main thing is that to Mary, the experience was real, very powerful and demanding, marking an unmistakable turning point in her life.

¹ 1859-1937

Jesus, who, like Gabriel, did not mind putting people on the spot, invited people to 'follow me', and some did, like Peter and Andrew, dropping everything and never looking back. Others asked for time to sort out their affairs first – and we never hear of them again. But Mary was not just asked to commit, she was also promised something: that her son would be the son of the Most High, and king over Israel for ever. What was it like? What was the electricity in the air that stopped it all just sounding ridiculous, or like one of those adverts in which an excessively matey man bursts into your house and informs you that you have just won an Aston Martin.

Mary never falters. All through the gospels, she seems to be present in the background, and sometimes near the centre of action, as in the crucifixion. Mary listens to, and supports her son. She is the silent force who asks for no personal recognition. Mary is the first prototype for all of us who are prepared to take on discipleship. She follows in the footsteps of Hannah, whom we read about in 1st Samuel; Hannah prayed for a child, and offered that child to be dedicated to God in service for his whole life. Her prayer of exultation when her wish was granted is a clear forerunner to Mary's Magnificat.²

So, Mary is both a fulfilment of the Old Testament – you probably remember the prophecy from Isaiah, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel."³; but she is also a fulfilment of Jesus's teaching on how Christians should conduct themselves. She is a model for us all.

[HYMN StF 181, H&P 79](#) [Of the Father's love begotten](#)

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| 1 | Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore. | 3 | This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word ;
now he shines, the long-expected ;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore. |
| 2 | By his word was all created ;
he commanded, it was done ;
earth and sky and boundless ocean,
universe of three in one ;
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,
all that breathes beneath the sun,
evermore and evermore. | 4 | O you heights of heaven, adore him ;
angel hosts, his praises sing ;
all dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King ;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert sing,
evermore and evermore ! |

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348–c. 413)
translated by John Mason Neale (1811–1866) and
Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877)

² 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

³ Isaiah 7:14

Prayers for Others

Lord we bring before you the poor, the suffering, the wicked. We bring before you the powerful, the corrupt, the mean, the unscrupulous, the exploiters, the snide, the plain nasty, the crooked dealers, the wheelers and the stealers, the frauds and the cheats, the vicious.

Lord, have mercy on your world. Help those who suffer from their suffering, and those who make suffering, from their blindness to what is truly good. Bring your blessings on all, and show your face to us, so that we may see your way made plain in your world, so that infinite good may shine through present need, and the power of your blessing may set temptation at nought.

We focus now on the needy of the moment. On the very poor of the southern lands; on people who cannot make a start on improving their lot because they are ground down by disease, by bad water, by inadequate food; by the need to labour for very little benefit. We think of those who have no opportunity for education, who are tied for ever to the most basic, grinding kind of work; of what awaits so many when their health fails, and they cannot keep pace with the work anymore.

We pray for all caught up in conflict; for the wounded, the terrified and the brutalised. For those who no longer have a home, whose families and friends are gone. For lives that are blown away in the whirlwind. For the young, who have grown up in fear and distrust. For all who are wasted, we pray, bring restoration, bring fullness, bring times of peace and restoration. Come into lives, visit us and stay, stay a while and stay for ever in our hearts.

And in this time of crisis we pray for all, throughout the world, who are caught by the coronavirus. We pray for medical staff, here in the NHS and everywhere, who do dangerous and demanding work. We pray for all involved in making, distributing and administering vaccines. We pray that the scourge which threatens us all will soon come to an end.

We pray for our church communities. Enable them to be your good agents in giving support to others; may they be centres of fellowship and generators of confidence and good cheer in these difficult times. May the generosity of Christmas be their character and hallmark.

And finally, we pray for those we have loved, who are no longer with us in this life but rest in your care. May they remain with us in our hearts and minds, and may we be confident that they rest in peace.

HYMN StF 94, H&P 463 To God be the glory

- 1 To God be the glory, great things he has done !
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
who yielded his life in atonement for sin,
and opened the life-gate that all may go in :
*Praise the Lord ! Praise the Lord !
Let the earth hear his voice !
Praise the Lord ! Praise the Lord !
Let the people rejoice !
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son ;
and give him the glory — great things he has
done !*
- 2 O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God !
And every offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives :
- 3 Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son ;
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see :
- Frances Jane van Alstyne, (Fanny Crosby) (1820–1915)

Blessing

God's blessing be ours; a blessing of loving kindness, a blessing of hope and courage, a blessing of listening and love. God's blessing be ours, always. Amen.

Acknowledgements

Blessing: Ruth Burgess, in *Winter*, Wild Goose Publications, 2016)

No wind at the window: John Bell, in *Innkeepers and Light Sleepers*, Wild Goose Publications, 1992. If you would like to hear this sung, you can find a solo version at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c1KR7OMGvM>