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Whisper within me that Word

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Whisper within me that Word



Annunciation Mosaic
at Cathedral of
the Holy Family,
Saskatoon

Archbishop Donald Bolen
Regina

Years ago, when working in Rome, I went to Florence with a list of things to see, including Fra Angelico's Annunciation. It didn't disappoint. You climb a large flight of stairs, expecting to catch your breath, and instead you find yourself greeted at the top of the stairwell by a painting that takes your breath away. The stunning beauty of the angel Gabriel and his bright wings, arms crossed, head bowed, his body leaning in expectancy and reverence; Mary herself knocked breathless by the sight and the message of the angel, disarmed by what is being asked of her.

Later that day, in an art shop nearby I stumbled upon prints of the Annunciation by another Florentine artist, one I had never heard of, Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557). While I loved the Fra Angelico Annunciation, Pontormo became the highlight of the trip, and eventually played a part in the stunning mosaic that Sarah Hall produced for the Queen of Peace Chapel at the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Saskatoon.

I quickly learned that Pontormo's fresco of the Annunciation was actually only a short walk away, in the little church of Santa Felicita. I quickly walked over, and in a church that many people walk past, just on the right upon entering, there they were.

In Pontormo's Annunciation Gabriel is overwhelmed and wrapped in amazement, in part by Mary, in part by the magnitude of what is taking place and the message he comes to bring: that though she is a virgin, she will conceive and bear a son; that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35); that nothing is impossible with God.



Photo by Sarah Hall

Pontormo's Annunciation in Santa Felicita, Florence

*Mary, in her simple dignity,
is completely present to the
moment, ready to say those
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to the Incarnation:
“let it be done unto me
according to your word.”*

Mary, in her simple dignity, is completely present to the moment, perhaps a little in awe, eyes wide open, serene, ready to say those words that open the door to the Incarnation: “let it be done unto me according to your word.” Both figures are utterly beautiful, innocent, caught up in something much larger than themselves. The figures draw you with them into the mystery of this encounter.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, nearly all of the great artists

produced Annunciations. It is a rich theme for artistic portrayal, both for the dramatic conversation it relates (Luke 1:26-38), and for the momentous character of that event from a faith perspective. The Annunciation marks the beginning of the Incarnation. Gabriel comes to proclaim God’s desire to become one of us. The Word in whom all things were created leaps into creation itself, enters into the human condition. In the love story between God and humanity, this is the moment the human

race could never have expected, yet had been yearning for from the beginning. God has come in search of us, to show us what it is to be human, to reveal God’s eternal designs for us, and to redeem us.

The Incarnation is first revealed to Mary, and she is not a passive bystander, but is asked to be the bearer of the Incarnate Word. Missionary poet John O’Brien, in an unpublished poem-prayer, opens for us how the Annunciation allows us to pray:



Mosaic photos by Grant Kernan

“Joy to the World” chapel glass mosaic, Cathedral of the Holy Family, Saskatoon, SK







*Whisper within me that Word
You secretly lodged in my name
Before the creation of the world;*

*Whisper within me that Word
You articulated as You knit me
Together in my mother's womb;*

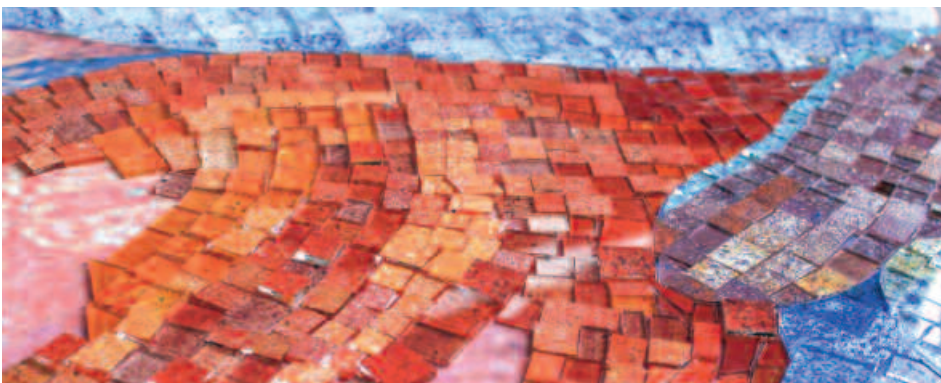
*Whisper within me that Word
Which holds all things together;
Whisper within me that Word
Become flesh in this act in this now.*

From stained glass to mosaic

The oldest image of an Annunciation is a fresco in the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, dating to the second half of the second century A.D. Since that time, artists have used stained glass, mosaic, relief, sculpture, oil painting, or other media to depict the scene. And the depictions vary greatly, captured in both Mary's and Gabriel's expression and posture, allowing us to imaginatively enter into the scene in different ways. They focus on different moments in Mary's reaction to the appearance of Gabriel and the news, from initial alarm, to reluctance, to acceptance; or on the historical momentousness of what is happening, and the way the divine comes crashing into the ordinary.

In some, Mary is reading; in others, sitting in a courtyard, or weaving, or praying. Her palms may be held out in humility, or her hands held to her chest in embrace of the message, or lifted in prayer. Some depict the impregnation of Mary through rays of light falling on her, or as a word being whispered into her ear, or with the Holy Spirit as a dove flying speedily towards her. The relationship between Mary and Gabriel shifts from one Annunciation to another, as does the background scenery; as does her joy, confusion or dismay at the encounter.

When Sarah Hall came to Saskatoon in 2011 to discuss the stained glass in the sanctuary as the Cathedral's structure was nearing completion, we started to speak also about the idea of an Annunciation in the Queen of Peace chapel. The initial design was for a Prairie Annunciation – Mary and



Photos by Wilhelm Peters

Artist Sarah Hall working on the mosaic; bottom right: a visit from Archbishop Donald Bolen

Gabriel to be depicted in stained glass on the two panels bookending the back wall of the chapel

During a visit to Toronto, I met with Sarah and spoke about seeing Pontormo's Annunciation. Now, I had never had the opportunity to work closely with a great artist before, and I believe Sarah's stained glass work is incredible, the work of a great master at a time in her career when masterpieces are flowing out. But the powerful experience of the Florence Annunciations made me foolish and bold, and I gave Sarah a copy of the Pontormo prints, which she graciously accepted. Not too long afterwards, she presented her idea for the first time: what about a mosaic rather than stained glass – a mosaic that would fill the entire wall; with Gabriel and Mary inspired by Pontormo's Annunciation? I was over the moon.

Gabriel and Mary embrace the world

Several months later, back in Saskatoon for the blessing of the new Cathedral and its glorious windows, Sarah proposed a new development with the mosaic. She had been to Florence to see the Pontormo Annunciation in person. She had been moved by the beauty of the two figures, but was preoccupied with the spacing between them. In Pontormo's fresco, the figures, a little larger than life-size, were intentionally separated by considerable open space. Then a hundred years later, a large reliquary monument was placed between Gabriel and Mary. It was to be lamented, but I had managed to ignore the monument and buy separate prints of the Annunciation figures.

Sarah had initially explored the two figures in the mosaic, coming close to touching, but she felt that something was missing. She mentioned that the reliquary monument had been placed between them in the church of Santa Felicita because the artistic tension between them was difficult to bear – and leaving open space was risky.

She proposed a different way to resolve that tension, a much more theologically and aesthetically satisfying

one. When Sarah first showed the Cathedral's arts committee a design of the mosaic with an image of the world between Gabriel and Mary, we gasped. From a faith perspective, this conversation between them was indeed all about the world, and for the world. The world in some cosmic sense was listening to this conversation on which so much depended. How could this be, that the eternal Word would enter into the created order in this way? And would Mary say yes? The word spoken by Gabriel, and Mary's *fiat*, span the world because they proclaim redemption for the world. Sarah's concept for the mosaic seemed to proclaim Christian faith's earthy message with elegance and eloquence.

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Work on the mosaic began in Paderborn. A small group from Saskatoon, including myself, had the opportunity to visit Wilhelm Peters' Glasmalerei studio there, to see something of the process by which the world was being made by the placing of a great variety of pieces of coloured glass, and the faces and hands of Mary and Gabriel were gradually taking shape through many layers of paint.

Then came the great day when the shipment arrived, in several parts, from Germany, and the great masterpiece came to life before us. The result was amazing. The chapel came into its own as the windows on either side of the mosaic where installed, and the Annunciation took its central place. Sarah showed us how five small pieces of glass (well concealed, but there to reward the determined viewer) that made

up the bottom part of the world, had place names written on them – well, four place names and a ticket to the heart of many a Saskatchewan person: Paderborn, Holy Land, Toronto, Saskatoon; and Roughriders! In the tradition of artists who insert some humour into their work, that little piece of glass has brought a lot of smiles to those who've been shown it or found it for themselves.

A place that invites prayer and dreaming

And so it was that years ago I stumbled upon the most beautiful Annunciation I had ever seen, in an oft passed-over little church in Florence; and today, thanks to Sarah Hall, the most beautiful

Annunciation I know blesses a chapel not well known in the prairie city of Saskatoon. Taking a little time in there, in the presence of this splendid mosaic, is spending time in a place that invites prayer, and invites dreaming:

- prayer which trusts that God comes to where we are and continues to speak a word to us, a word that invites a response, the response of our lives, a response that says "let it be done unto me according to your word"
- a dream which is God's dream for the world, a world where that word continues to be made into flesh. ■

Donald Bolen was the Bishop of Saskatoon at the time the Cathedral of the Holy Family was being built and its windows and mosaic by Sarah Hall were installed. Reprinted with permission from *A Thousand Colours: Sarah Hall Glass*.