

An Advent Meditation with Cynthia Bourgeault
Unedited Transcript

Well, hello to all of you, and I hope your Advent season is progressing wisely and well and richly and deeply. Sometime during the season, and it varies from liturgical year to liturgical year and from church to church, but sometime surely into the picture the Virgin Mary makes her appearance. Sometimes it's on the third Sunday of Advent where we dedicate a whole day to pondering her effect, sometimes in monastic traditions she sort of weaves her way through the whole thing. But it's very important because come to think of it had there been no Blessed Virgin there would have been no Incarnation and no Advent, no nothing. She's an indisputable essential part of the story. Not only the what of it and the how of it, but in a deep way the why of it. And it's been not without reason that Mary has been called the mother of contemplatives, because in her bearing, both literally and spiritually, during this whole richly feminine and in gentle time of annunciation, gestation, and child birthing she models to us in essence what it means to be an active co-creator and participant in a world in which the treasure from the heart of God, Jesus was not sent as a kind of remediation for sin, but as the sort of crowning revelation of what it means to stand here with one foot in the finite world, one foot in the infinite, bridging the gap in our heart and creating out of that the wholeness, which is divine love. So, very often, poets will say things a lot better than theologians, perhaps you've noticed and one of my favorite of all explorations of the meaning of not only the how and the what, but the why of the annunciation comes in a poem called "Annunciation" by the modern poet Denise Levertov and in this she tries to paint a picture of the psyche, of the state of being of this person that we often just put up on a pedestal and sort of identify as the mother of surrender and Denise is trying to get at the fact that surrender, the kind of surrender that co-creates the world of redeemed love, the world of redemption, is not an act of passive knuckling under, but an active participational intelligence. She writes in this one poem and she says, "Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings the angelic ambassador standing or hovering, whom she acknowledges, a guest. We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage." There's an insight. "Courage," the word comes from French "corage," and to see Mary as modeling the way of the heart. Denise continues, "The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent. God waited." And we often think of Advent as the time where we're doing the waiting. This is a wonderful flip in this poem that says in a deep way God waited. God waited, the whole wheels of creation awaited a yes from a human being, that is formed not with gritted teeth and humble knuckled under obedience, but an active intelligence. And then Denise Levertov goes on to explore what this intelligence was and some of her words, "Compassion and intelligence fused in her, indivisible." So, the contemplative act, the act of courage, the act of compassion and intelligence that allows a yes to be yes is indeed an act of seeing which is at the same time an act of participation, a yes which is not passive but active. The poet continues, "Called to a destiny more momentous than any and all of Time, she" Mary, "did not quail, only asked a simple, 'How can this be?' and gravely, courteously, took to heart the angel's reply, perceiving instantly the astounding ministry she was offered: to bear in her womb infinite weight and lightness; to carry in hidden finite inwardness, nine months of Eternity; to contain in slender vase of being, the sum of power-in narrow flesh, the sum of light. Then bring to birth, push out into air, a man child needing like any other, milk and love- but who was God."

Suppose this world isn't a mistake, a myth, a fall. Suppose it's precisely these conditions of fragility, finitude, density which allow the divine heart when it's focused and brought to radiance in the heart of a human being who is actively, courageously, intelligently receptive, then we have the real co-creation of the Christ, the infinite love in finite form. And that's the why of what this festival is about. And it takes the whole power and profundity, human depth, physical depth of the—of the god



bearer, our earth, our planet to bring forth in human form what the always uncreated brilliant light of love is like. So, during this time of Advent as we ourselves converge towards the Christmas, the birth of the Christic may it be not just in a stable without, but in the stable of your heart, in your own human flesh and form that this—the rays of this uncreated light may shine forth in you and radiate your entire ordinary life with the glow of the eternal, from which it is always emerging and into which we are always returning. Thank you and a blessed Advent.

Poem excerpts: Denise Levertov, “Annunciation,” *A Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), 86.