



**The Annunciation and the Gaze of Grace**  
Thoughts During Advent 2016  
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My relationship with Catholic theology has evolved since becoming a mother and since studying depth psychology and human development. In an Advent Bible Study a few years ago, as we sat with Mary and the Annunciation, a new understanding began to dawn. This Advent I try to share some of the pieces of the puzzle that have come together for me since then.

Interestingly the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, para. 490-493) mentions Luke's annunciation narrative twice when discussing the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. According to the Catechism, it is the fact that Gabriel salutes Mary as "full of grace" that is at the heart of the notion of Immaculate Conception:

...The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as "full of grace" (Lk 1:28). In fact, **in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace.**

There is something powerful for me in this notion that Mary's "yes" was a freely given affirmation *of her own vocation*, and that she was wholly borne by grace in stepping into this vocation. As I meditate with this notion, wonderful images come forth. The one who will give birth to grace is herself borne by grace. Mary's womb is the holding environment where Christ will come into being and grow. And Mary herself is fully held and nurtured within a mystical

divine holding environment that we may call grace. We see Mary as both womb-bearer and held within a cosmic womb. God's relationship to Christ is *through* Mary, and suddenly God seems less "father" of Mary's divine child than "grandmother." The catechism's recognition of Mary's being "full of grace" speaks to a profound relationship between Mary and the divine that *precedes* the conception of Christ.

As one who is passionate about the Hebrew Bible, I have a particular understanding of the phrase "full of grace" as it appears in Luke's annunciation. The phrase has fascinating roots in the Old Testament. The Greek word that Luke uses here was the word used to translate the Hebrew word *heydn*. A closer look at *heydn* in the Bible gives a backdrop for its Greek equivalent in Gabriel's message to Mary.

In the Hebrew Bible this notion of receiving grace, or being favored, is to be had in a very specific relational manner: grace is to be *found in the eyes of another*. Thus: in Genesis 6:8, "Noah found favor [*heydn*] in the eyes of the Lord." In Genesis 39, when Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, he finds *heydn* in the eyes of his master (39:4). In the book of Ruth, Ruth finds *heydn* in the eyes of Boaz while working in his fields (2:10). In each of the forty-five instances in which *heydn* appears in narrative contexts in the Hebrew Bible, *heydn* is bestowed 1) through the gaze of another and 2) by one who has power over the other. The person who seeks favor in the eyes of someone else acknowledges dependence upon the one who bestows that grace.

I absolutely love this notion that grace is bestowed through the gaze of another, and that it happens through a relationship of dependence! This ancient theological intuition that we see in the Hebrew Bible and in Luke's gospel resonates with something I learned in a different area of my studies: *a human baby's self-conception begins in the gaze of his or her mother*.

By holding the infant in her arms, and taking the baby in with her gaze, the mothering one offers the newborn its first opportunities for self-reflection. Neurological research shows that the infant's focus is predisposed to find the mother's face while nursing; locking the gaze to the mother's is a brainstem reflex, strongest in the earliest days of life. Just as the human infant emerges from the womb with the instinct to latch on to the breast with his or her mouth, so there is the innate impulse to latch on to the mother's face with his or her eyes.

Just as the Bible speaks of a "gaze of grace", so this concept of mirroring teaches us from a psychological perspective about the gaze of grace between mother and child. In the mutual gaze, not only will a bond be forged between mother and baby, but the newborn will discover *awareness of his or her own being*. There is a silent communication from parent to infant as they hold their

child and successfully mirror him or her. Held in such a way, the baby may read on the parent's face: "I know you! I see you! In my eyes find a reflection of your true and beloved identity. This grace to be found in my eyes *is* you."

So now, with this Hebrew notion of *heydn* and with the psychological notion of mirroring, let us return to Luke's annunciation narrative and ask, "What if Gabriel's salutation to Mary – his assertion that she has found favor with God includes the theological intuition that to find favor with God is to find grace *in God's eyes*?" Or, stated in the language of depth psychology, "What if Gabriel's announcement to Mary includes recognition of the mirroring relationship between God and Mary?"

To interpret *Mary's status ('full of grace')* as indicative of her being fully mirrored by God leads to a flood of new images, doesn't it? Picture a baby held by its mother, and caught in her loving gaze as she really *sees* the miraculous and unique wonder that is her child. Some psychologists believe that this is how a baby first conceives of itself as a self. A baby can read from his or her mother's face what she is seeing when their eyes meet, and this is how the baby first "sees" him or herself. Now imagine Mary as a mystic with the ability to experience herself as held by God, loved by God, *known* by God. The communication from Gabriel that she is "full of grace" is not simply information conveyed. This sort of good news is a body-based, deep-in-the-soul knowing. Imagine feeling gazed upon *by God* – the way a baby is looked upon while in the arms of her or his mother. Imagine that you are simultaneously experiencing God's love, trust and utter delight right along with the awareness that this love, trust and utter delight is *in response to* seeing and knowing *you*. This pure, full, divine mirror fills you with an indubitable grace that feels at once to be purely God's goodness *and also* a deep and unshakable recognition of your own authentic you-ness.

With these images in mind, let us muse upon Mary's response to Gabriel, after he has given her his message. She says "Here I am." In Hebrew, this phrase is one word: *hineni*. And it is what those who do great things in the world are able to say when called by God: Here I am. It is also the simple truth that a baby's psyche/soul experiences when that baby is truly and lovingly seen by the one who holds and gazes upon them: "Here I am."

Mary's *hineni* is a moment of self-conception. In saying, "Here I am," Mary asserts self-knowledge, self-actualization, presence. Held and seen by God in a mystical way, she knows her own goodness, and trusts her own potential to bring forth that which is both utterly divine and authentically derived from her very human self. Mirrored by God she can trust her own creative power and not let shame or doubt or cultural expectation put boundaries upon it.

When we see this annunciation moment as a mirroring moment, the opening words of Mary's "Magnificat" truly sing, don't they? "My soul doth magnify the Lord!" I imagine Mary dancing in response to the innate rhythms welling up from within her depths and proclaiming, "When God sees *me* and experiences my soul, I experience myself in such a grace-filled way that my soul moves freely into action! My life begets such creative truth and beauty in the world that God actually grows!"

And of course, Mary's unique vocation had everything to do with mirroring. We tend to take it for granted that Jesus, as the Messiah, is 100% human and 100% divine. We cheat on the math a bit and think to ourselves "human mother, divine father....yeah, that works." But from a psychological perspective we may see it differently: in order for Jesus to live into the fullness of his fully-human and fully-divine self, he needed to grow up in a holding environment where this fullness was *recognized* and *cherished* and *nurtured*. Regardless of the child's innate identity as the Messiah, without a good enough holding environment in which to grow up -- without mirroring -- the child could not grow up to fulfill such a destiny.

In order to do this for Jesus, Mary herself needed to be full of grace. She needed to have been caught in the divine gaze herself, and to have felt her own unique being authentically recognized by divine Being. To say that Mary "was redeemed from the moment of her conception," as the catechism states, has new meaning according to this psychological-theological interpretation. Her "conception" means that her own self-knowing was actualized through the gaze of divine other. This mystical connection between Mary and God gave her an immaculate mirror through which to experience herself. It was Mary's profound spiritual self-knowing -- that conception born in the gaze of grace -- that empowered her to mirror her child's divine nature. Divine nurture of *her* spiritual being was a precursor to the "Here I am" uttered by the one willing and able to be mother of God.