

**The Virgin Who Points the Way**  
**Luke 1:26 - 38**  
Windsor Middle School Chapel  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
Tel Hai Chapel  
November 29, December 4 and 7, 2016

This weekend Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church is hosting an art show of The Flying Colors art group. Flying Colors have been meeting at Fairview Church for twenty years. In celebration of their twenty years of meeting at Fairview, we are hosting the art events of this weekend. And, additionally, my sermon this morning will be somewhat different from the usual Sunday morning fare. We will talk a bit about art, Christian art and iconography. I will be using a number of high resolution images on the screen as I speak. Feel free to move to another seat in the sanctuary if you cannot see the screen clearly.

Our scripture passage this morning, is Luke 1:26 – 38: The Annunciation. This passage tells of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, informing her that she is the one chosen to be the Mother of the Messiah, Jesus, Emmanuel. There is a very beautiful Roman Catholic church in the modern city of Nazareth, Israel, appropriately named The Church of the Annunciation, celebrating this Bible passage.



When this church was being built, it invited Christian artists from around the world to provide the decorative art work for the building. The church was completed in 1969 and that date is reflected in some of the art within the church's walls: some of it is just plain weird – like the 1960's. But there is one piece of decorative art that I think is magnificent: a mosaic of Mary and baby Jesus.



I recall the first time I visited this church, in the early 1970's, I found myself fascinated by this image. I was a young man, seventeen years old, and it had never occurred to me to picture baby Jesus as Japanese; or the Virgin Mary in a kimono! But that is the power of art. It can open our understanding to new ways of seeing our world.

Lois Ann has a wide-ranging collection of Nativity sets from around the world. Part of the Atkinson preparations for Advent each year involves deciding which nativity sets will be unpacked and where they will be placed in our home. Lois Ann's collection includes nativities from Israel, the Cameroun, Vietnam, Peru, Honduras, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, Poland and the United States. The varieties of nativities, the varied portraits of Mary and baby Jesus, remind us that the message of Christ is given to all people.

This morning, I want us to think together about the ways the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph and Jesus – have been portrayed in art through the centuries.

Before we do that, we do need to note that there are three great traditions within the Christian faith: Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. We, as Presbyterians, are part of the Protestant stream. These three streams of tradition relate to the story of the Holy Family in different ways. Roman Catholics and the Orthodox tend to give to the Holy Family in general, and Mary the mother of Jesus, in particular, a much higher place in their thinking and theology. For this reason, Mary, Joseph and Jesus show up in the art of Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches more than in the art of the Protestant tradition. My sense is that we Protestants think that Mary "*belongs*" to the Catholics, but not to our community, the Protestant Tradition of the Christian faith. For this reason, Catholic and Orthodox artists are more willing to portray Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family, in art. And, for the Orthodox churches, icons play a role in their worship practices. The word *icon* simply means *image*. An icon is a religious, a spiritual image. The contrast between a Presbyterian Church sanctuary and that of an Orthodox Church

is striking. The sanctuary of Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church is relatively plain. There are few artistic images within our sanctuary. There are two angels, who appear to be unrolling a scroll, in the stained glass above the chancel. The color in the stained glass in the sanctuary is mostly geometric. As you leave the sanctuary there is a stained-glass representation of Mary at the empty tomb of Jesus. She is weeping, for she has not yet seen the risen Christ who is standing behind her. In contrast to Fairview's relative visual simplicity, visit a Greek Orthodox Church and you will find in the front of the sanctuary an iconostasis – a wall of religious art, an art gallery of spiritual and religious imagery. On our recent trip to Israel, I sat in a Greek Church while a group of German Christians were singing, praying and reading scripture. I could not understand what these Christians were saying, but it did not matter. I was pleased to study the art work all around.



To begin our discussion of the artistic portrayals of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, let me show you first a photograph that is most **definitely not** that of the Holy Family.



This is a photograph from 1986 of the Atkinson family as it was then constituted at that time: me, Lois Ann and our son, Benjamin. What do we see in this photograph? Lois Ann, Benjamin and I are in a field. Though it is in the shadows, there is a small tree in front of us that we have just planted. The woman to our right is apparently planting a tree as well. The ground is rocky. In the background is a yellow bus with Hebrew lettering on it. Also in the background are additional small forested areas. The woman behind us is holding a camera, suggesting that this is a tour group. I am holding a Bible and a book of Holy Land maps. Lois Ann and I are smiling and clearly happy. This photo was taken in Israel, near Benjamin's second birthday. We are celebrating his birthday by planting a tree in Benjamin's honor. Benjamin looks a little thoughtful. He is probably wondering when someone is going to hand him a piece of birthday cake.

What is the message of this photograph? What does it say to us? We note that this is a real family. It is a photograph taken at a particular time and place. The photograph was taken in a natural setting. The Hebrew words tell us that we are probably in Israel. We see the bus, a car, and other people in the background. We look at this photograph and we know that we are looking at a family in the real world; the world as it existed in the 1980's in Israel.

Let us look at our next image. This is a painting by the artist Raphael. A reproduction of this painting hangs in the stairwell in our home.



What do you see? First, we note that this is not a photograph, it is a painting. Look carefully and you will see the brushstrokes of the artist. It is a painting of a young family, though the husband appears to be a good deal older than his bride. Their clothing certainly suggests a different time period. This is not a modern family. Still, the family is painted in a natural setting. We can see buildings, trees, other people, in the background. The landscape is diverse: hills, valleys and mountains. The location could be somewhere in Pennsylvania.

You do not go to the beach without getting a tan. We all must live in the age in which we are born. The artist Raphael lived during the Renaissance. He was a product of his time. After the Renaissance, it was expected of artists to paint the natural world, the horizontal world, the world as they saw it around them. This expectation presents a challenge to an artist who wishes to portray spiritual truth. In the Nicene Creed, we declare that we “believe in all that is, seen and unseen.” How do you **see** the unseen world? How do we perceive spiritual reality? How does an artist paint such things? Spiritual reality – things such as God, love, forgiveness, evil, divine purpose, angels, humility, prayer, providence, faith, hope and love – these are real realities, but they do not have the concrete material existence of the natural world. You cannot see or touch them. How do you paint such unseen realities? This artistic expectation after the Renaissance presents a challenge to artists who wish to make the subject of their art a spiritual theme. If you are an artist and you want to paint a spiritual theme, how do you do so using natural reality?

Raphael does three things to address this challenge. First, he fudged a bit by including the halos. Halos are not natural reality. Halos **are not** part of nature. Raphael’s halos are present, but not dominant. The halos over the mother and son tell us that there is something more to be known and understood about *this* mother and *her* son. The halos tell us that it is not enough to see them simply and solely as mother and son; something more, something spiritual, is being communicated.

Second, Raphael communicated his spiritual truth using the biblical symbol of the sacrificial lamb. Today we might not be surprised to see a baby riding the back of the big family dog – think of the children’s books about Carl, the Rottweiler; or the big red dog, Clifford. The presence of the lamb is an important clue. By including the sheep Raphael is doing what Christian artists have done through the centuries. He is giving us a symbol to reflect a spiritual truth that is contained in the natural setting of his painting. The symbol points us to a spiritual message hidden within the frame of this painting. What is that message? In the gospel of John, when John the Baptist sees Jesus coming to be baptized, John declares (1:29), “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! The imagery of the *Lamb of God* is very significant in the biblical story. The presence of the lamb in the painting tells us that the child portrayed by Raphael in this painting is Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God.

And, thirdly, Raphael communicates his message of the spiritual importance of this family through the artificial perspective he uses. The perspective of the painting is surprising. The family is painted so that they take up the bulk of the surface of the

painting. The natural setting and background is present. The family exists in the “real world:” but, relative to the natural setting of the background, the painting is dominated by the size of the three family members. The three family members are larger than life.

A question we should ask at this point is this: how did artists prior to the Renaissance communicate spiritual truth in their art? To answer that, our next image is a reproduction of the newest icon Lois Ann and I have added to our collection.



Again, we have a painting of the Holy Family. It is like Raphael’s painting in that Mary and Jesus each have halos. Joseph gets one too this time. But, besides the halos, the paintings are *very* different. In this painting, Mary, Joseph and Jesus are not painted with the same natural lifelike quality given them by Raphael. They are human, to be sure, but the representation is not quite three dimensional. In addition, there are Greek letters, words and coded abbreviations, on the ground behind Mary and Joseph. And, the most obvious difference between the two paintings is the presence of the ground. In this image, behind the Holy Family is a *ground* of gold. It is not a *background*. A background is what we saw in Raphael’s painting. A background places the subject of the painting in the natural world. Raphael painted the Holy Family in a natural setting. Mary, Joseph and Jesus could have been outside the town of Jim Thorpe in the Poconos. In contrast, in the icon, the ground of gold behind Mary, Joseph and Jesus could not be mistaken for Pennsylvania! Icons are often painted on gold ground as a way of emphasizing the spiritual significance, the value, of the message they proclaim.

The presence of the ground is key in assisting us to understand the message of an icon. By painting on a ground, and not a background, the first thing the artist tells us, the viewer, is that what we see in the icon is a spiritual reality, not natural reality. What is being communicated is a vertical truth, not a horizontal perspective.

Those who paint icons believe that the natural world hides the spiritual reality. In the natural world alone, the spiritual message gets lost. The art historian H. R. Rookmaker used to say that "Nature eats up grace." If all you see is the natural, the horizontal world of time and space, then you will not perceive spiritual reality. There is more to life than what you can see, touch, taste, hear and smell. There is an unseen world that gives meaning and purpose to the natural world. To be the men and women we ought to be, we must move past the seen world and discern the unseen spiritual truths that underlie it. As an aside, this is the great failure of much of modern education: it teaches and trains our children to see only the material world. To be fully human, to find fulfillment in life: we must see beyond the natural world to perceive the spiritual truths behind it. If you want to see the spiritual reality, you must break through the barrier of the natural reality.

This search, this quest to break through natural reality to perceive the spiritual reality that undergirds it, is illustrated in our next image. It is from an anonymous artist. It is the Ferrarese School: The Virgin and the Child with angels. A copy of this painting hangs on the wall in my office. This painting is one of my all-time favorites. To see the original, you need to travel to Edinburgh, Scotland.



Before I describe this painting and its message in detail, permit me to tell you a little bit about the traditions behind the iconographic patterns of representing Mary and Jesus. Tradition says that the first iconographic images of Mary and Jesus were painted by Saint Luke, the author of Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke must have been a very talented person. We know from the New Testament that he was a physician. Luke is a Greek name, not a Hebrew name. His name tells us that his family was Hellenized, that is, profoundly influenced by ancient Greek culture. Luke wrote his gospel and the book of Acts, following the ancient Greek standards for historical writing. Clearly, he was very well educated. And, at least according to tradition, he could paint also. Tradition also suggests that it was Luke who first painted each of the three classic patterns for portraying Mary and Jesus in iconographic art.

The first, and less common pattern, is that of Mary and Jesus surprised by a vision of angels. This is the iconic pattern of this painting. Mary and Jesus are in the center of the painting and, in each upper corner, is an angel.

It is a shame that we do not know who painted this painting and that it is simply attributed to the Ferrarese School. This particular painter was a spiritually insightful man. You see the iconic pattern in the center of the painting: Mary, Jesus, and the angels. Now, look to the top, bottom and sides of the painting. What do you see? What is that on the perimeter of the painting? It appears that what we see on the sides, top and bottom of the painting are the torn remains of another painting. The canvas portions on the sides of the painting suggest that there was a previous painting. This previous painting covered up Mary, Jesus and the angels. The artist is saying to us, in order to see the spiritual reality of Mary, Jesus and the angels, you must first break through the other canvas that is covering and hiding them from your sight. Mary and Jesus are hidden until you break through that which hides them from your sight.

What is it that covers and hides the spiritual world? It is the natural world. If you see only the natural world, then you paint only the natural world. If you see only the natural world, all you see is a mother and her son. The artist is saying to us that to see the spiritual reality, of Mary, and of her son, Jesus, Messiah, we must break through the canvas of the natural world. This is what the torn canvas on the top, sides and bottom of the painting is telling us: there is an unseen world in front of us. We must learn to see it.

Our next image is the second of the three patterns or types that tradition attributes to Saint Luke. It is the Virgin of Tenderness.



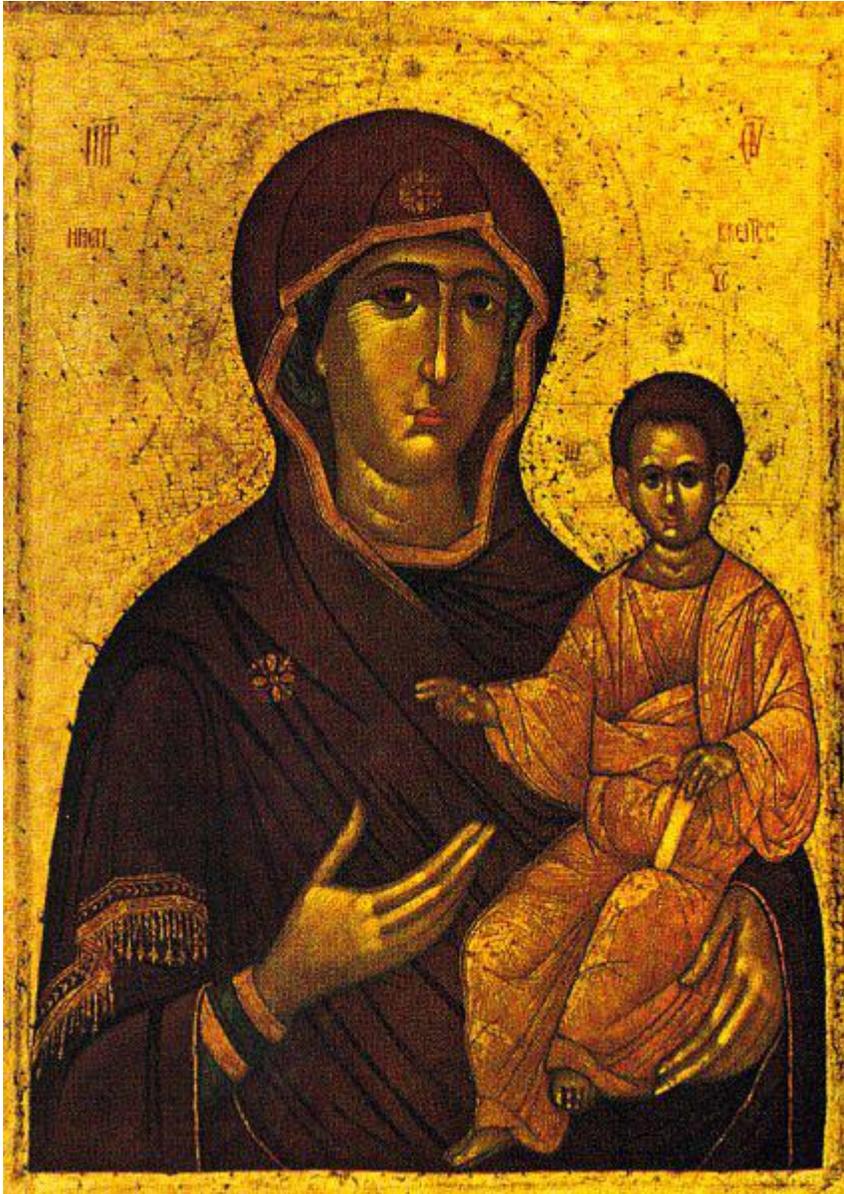
This is a very common iconographic image of Mary and Jesus. Note that it is painted on a ground. There are Greek letters, coded messages, on the ground around Mary and Jesus. We are looking at a spiritual reality. In this pattern, Mary and Jesus are

looking at each other. Their faces are close. Their cheeks touch. There is a tenderness between Mary and her infant son.

There is also a concreteness to this portrait of Mary and Jesus. The painter is not painting an abstract theme of mother and child. He is not interested in motherhood per se. There is only one mother and one child an icon painter paints. He is painting Mary and Jesus. Only Mary and Jesus.

This, by the way, is why some modern art is so offensive. When a crass modern artist paints Mary and covers her with elephant dung, or puts a crucifix in a jar of urine: this is art that is a specific attack on a spiritual message. It makes mockery of spiritual realities many hold dear. This is why we naturally, and rightly, recoil from such images.

The last icon pattern attributed to St. Luke is the Virgin who points the Way.



In this icon, Mary typically holds Jesus in the crook of her left arm. Mary's eyes look out straight from the icon, at you, the viewer. Her right arm and hand are held in a manner that she is pointing toward her son. She "points the way" toward Jesus. By looking at you, the viewer, Mary is drawing you into painting. She looks at you, and in turn, she points you toward Jesus.

What is Mary doing in this icon? This is Mary the evangelist. This icon is an evangelistic message. It is an evangelistic icon. Mary wants you to see her son, Jesus. She points you to him. She wants you to follow in his way. She is saying, "Look at my son." She is encouraging you to believe in Christ.

And that is how this message will end. I invite you to do what Mary is pointing you to do. Turn in faith towards her son Jesus. Believe in him. Look to him. Follow him.

Say "Amen!" Somebody!

Luke 1: 26 – 38

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,  
<sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's  
name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"  
<sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might  
be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.  
<sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.  
<sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him  
the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his  
kingdom there will be no end."

<sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most  
High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.  
<sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth  
month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> And Mary  
said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel  
departed from her.