**Reading**

Denise Levertov, “Annunciation,” in *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 162­-4. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be,* second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 150-2.

**About the Author**

Denise Levertov was born in 1923 and raised in England, where she was educated at home by her exceptionally literary Welsh mother and immigrant father, a Russian Jew who had converted to Christianity and become an Anglican minister. She always loved poetry and began writing young; at age twelve she sent some poems to T.S. Eliot, who sent an encouraging two-page response. She started publishing poems in top journals at the age of 17, with a first book at 23. After serving as a nurse during World War II, she married an American and moved to the United States. She published many books of poetry, becoming an important voice in American poetry.

Stirred by participation in the political struggles of the 1960s, Levertov cofounded Writers and Artists Protest against the War in Vietnam and intensified her commitment to activism for peace and justice, which would also shape much of her poetry. She was jailed many times for civil disobedience in antiwar and antinuclear demonstrations. She also wrote and worked to address environmental concerns.

During the 1980s, Levertov’s lifelong engagement with questions of mystery and faith led her to embrace Christianity, first in a general way and then as a member of the Catholic church, which she joined in 1990 in Seattle, where she would live until her death in 1997. In an introduction to her religious poetry published in the year she died, Levertov remembered her “slow movement from agnosticism to Christian faith, a movement incorporating much of doubt and questioning as well as of affirmation.”

Another poem by Levertov, “Beginners,” also appears in *Leading Lives That Matter*, 2d. ed., pp 518-9, in the chapter “What Are My Obligations to Future Human and Other Life.”

**Commentary**

“Vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” So a synonym for a “vocation” is a “calling,” something we have been summoned to do. Perhaps the most memorable and instructive story of a calling in all of Christian literature and art is the angel Gabriel’s announcement (annunciation) to Mary that she will bear the Messiah. The summons comes not to a powerful man but to a poor young woman. It comes within the confines of a home and family, not out in the wilderness or in the public square. Denise Levertov’s poem both dramatizes that summons and shows its larger implication for all of us as we respond—or not—to the summonses that come to us.

**Discussion questions**

Start your discussion by having someone read the poem aloud. As everyone listens, each person should notice if a certain phrase or line stands out for them. Share these phrases or lines with one another, briefly explaining (if you can) why they speak to you. Then read the poem aloud again before discussing it further.

The poem begins by asking us to call to mind a scene the poet assumes the reader knows. Reflect on how you—and how biblical story and Western art—have imagined this scene of annunciation. Take some time with the words and images the poet says “we know.”

Read aloud the account of this scene in Luke 1:26-38.

Look at a painting of the Annunciation; many are available on line. Good examples are by the Renaissance artists Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci, and by the American Henry Tanner.

Levertov emphasizes this young woman’s “courage” and “choice.” Do you see and hear these qualities in the biblical or artistic sources? (Levertov implies that they are missing; do you agree?)

In the second section, the poet asks “Aren’t there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?” Have you experienced anything like an annunciation, a powerfully focused moment of calling? What was it, and what did that moment feel like? Did you say yes or no?

This poem takes place in the moment when Mary is choosing. “This was the moment no one speaks of, when she could still refuse.” God waits. Mary is free. Reread the last section of the poem, beginning “She did not cry ‘I cannot, I am not worthy.’” What do you learn about Mary in this moment of Yes? Have you ever said, or can you imagine saying, so clear and powerful a Yes?

What can we learn from the poem about what a call is and how we should respond?