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A New Nativity: III. Gabriel Again – And Our Angelic Opportunity

Matthew 1:18b-25; 2:13-15 NRSV When [Jesus's] mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.... Now after [the Wise Men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

Like many of you, when our children were small, we had a Nativity scene which we always set up. In houses where we had a fireplace, it went on the mantle. In houses without, it was usually placed on a sidetable near the Christmas tree or on a coffee table in front of the couch. One year, in a mood of playfulness – and because I always enjoyed hearing them go “Daaaaaad!!!!” – I placed one of the small ceramic armadillos from my collection into that scene. And while the armadillo may have been small in relation to real-live armadillos (or, if you’re from Texas, more likely the real-dead ones you see on the highway), it dwarfed the figures in the nativity scene like some horror movie with really bad special effects – this grayish beast giantly hovering over Mary, Joseph, and the Baby. I got my wish, our little ones in unison yelled “Daaaaaad!” but because children are the most conservative people in the world when it comes to Christmas – where, if you do it once, it’s a “tradition” from then on – for years after that whenever we set up that scene, one of the children would make sure to

fetch that ceramic armadillo and carefully place it in position. But when you let armadillos in, who knows what riffraff can follow; a couple of years after that, for some reason we had this ugly orange little cloth camel doll with eyes that were crossed. And somehow, he too came to be a traditional part of our Advent preparations and became known by the name of “the Googly-Eyed Camel.” For several years thereafter, he and Mr. Armadillo kept company, watching over the scene, outrageously orange and lumpenly gray, and it came to be that Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without them.

The stories of Jesus’ birth record no armadillos or googly-eyed camels, but they record, as we have seen these last two Sundays, other figures that could well be placed into our nativity scenes for they are an integral part of the story. The generations leading up to Jesus we saw on the first Sunday of Advent reminded us that crowded around that cradle could well be those women and men who made Jesus who he is and who in their saintliness and sinfulness showed that God’s grace can be found in the most unlikely of people and that God can truly redeem and re-make people. And then last Sunday we looked at the Angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary and the powerful, beautiful, lovely, disturbing song that it occasioned from her. We were reminded by looking at Gabriel Rosetti’s painting of that moment of how God did not force Mary to be the bearer of Jesus and how God does not coerce any of us, but moves instead always and only through the power of persuasive love. Gabriel too, then, could rightly well be a part of the expanded Nativity scenes we are imagining this season, for the message he bore first to Zecharah and then to Mary – “Be not afraid” – is THE message of God’s good news since the days of God’s gracious giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, good news now embodied for the whole world in Jesus.

Today, Gabriel is back again. The scripture does not explicitly name him as the bearer of two messages to Joseph, but the tradition of the church has long named Gabriel as that angel who once again conveys a word of good news, telling Joseph that

what is happening to Mary is of God and that in the midst of threat and terror to him and his family there are those who will provide haven and sanctuary.

The setting for Gabriel's first visit to Joseph, of course, is when he discovers that Mary is pregnant. Now, this had to be an agonizing discovery. For you see, in that day, the custom was that young people were engaged to be married a year before they were actually wed. But, as I mentioned last week, the law of the day was that such an engagement was just as serious as a marriage. And the stated punishment for adultery during that engagement was one of two things: either Joseph could have demanded that Mary be stoned to death, or he could, with two witnesses present, simply present her with a letter that said "I divorce you." It was the latter that he had apparently decided on when the story tells us that "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, [he] planned to dismiss her quietly."

In other words, in the midst of an agonizing situation, where it seemed that the only choices were not good – as sometimes is the case in all of our lives – Joseph chose what seemed to be the least bad option. And if that had indeed been the decision he'd carried through on, he would not have been long remembered, except by family and friends. They would have remembered him as one who chose not to harm the person whom he *thought* had betrayed him - a choice that indeed would have taken courage and righteousness and an ability to rise above the taunting that no doubt would have come his way. But he didn't do that, did he? For God sent Joseph the angel Gabriel to tell him that he was actually a part of very good news, and to go ahead and take Mary as his wife for the child she was carrying was of God and would be the Savior of the world.

What do we do with this and what do we learn from all this? Just this: Sometimes God indeed will place before us a new thing, a new way, that seems to go against the tradition, the rules, the received wisdom. Now, we should never claim that

lightly or in a self-justifying way or rationalizing way. There are good reasons for the values, the teachings, the norms that we, as ones who would be righteous ourselves, try to follow. But sometimes, sometimes indeed God sends a new thing, a new way. And that is what God did through Gabriel with Joseph, and that is what God sometimes does with us. For you see, what undergirds and grounds the witness of scripture and tradition is the very thing that God will sometimes call us to be and do even as it goes **beyond** that scripture and tradition, as it did with Joseph. After all, in the first half of the 19th century God sent angels to many people to remind them of the good news that God's love is for everyone no matter what their skin color, and so increasing numbers were convinced by that good news and helped to end the abomination of slavery.¹ Or when the words of the Bible have supposedly said that those of a certain sexual orientation are to be shunned, over time, more and more people listened to the God-sent angels who called for a new understanding based on God's love for each and all, and to welcome such folks fully to the Lord's house and table. And so when Gabriel visited Joseph he too bore good news from God, even though it went beyond what Joseph had been taught – and yet that good news was actually based on the very love and unconditional grace for each and all that the Bible gives witness to.

The Bible always, as you have heard me say more than once, always offers us a word of **both** grace **and** challenge. And the challenge for you and me from this story of good news and grace given to Joseph is how are we to be angels to those whom God sends us to? You see, there is a lot of really insipid and shallow talk in our culture about angels. Some folks talk about angels as if they were their personal good luck charms, sitting on their shoulders and getting them parking places and helping them avoid speed traps. But that is a misreading of who angels are in the New Testament

¹The Rev. Barbara Blaisdell eloquently and persuasively addresses this “going beyond to a new thing” in a different context her excellent sermon “The Gospel Unhindered - Or, Curing the Nasties,” preached at First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, February 10, 2010.

and a missed opportunity for you and me. You see, the story of Gabriel is also a story for you and I to emulate, to share the good news with those whom God puts in our path, to refuse to give into words of hate, fear and suspicion; words of xenophobia, racism and religious bigotry. Gabriel's message to Joseph was about an event that was to be good news for all people. All people. All. And every day you and I have the choice as to whether we will, in turn, reflect that good news, whether we will be angels ourselves, or whether we will be more like Herod, the one whose life was ruled by bullying and bigotry and terror. Which will we choose? That's the question.

And that brings us to Gabriel's second visit to Joseph, when he warned him in a dream to flee with his family to Egypt in order to escape Herod's evil and terror. My friends, I want you to hear, really hear this story. Don't just hear it in the ways you've always heard it, as simply the story that you know so well that it doesn't really touch you but is simply something familiar. No, this story too, especially in this day and time, is both good news and it is a challenge that you and I cannot escape. The good news is that terror didn't win. In an almost unimaginable act of terror, Herod slaughtered dozens of innocent baby boys simply because of their religion and where they were from. But the good news is that the terror didn't win, and God used the immense kindness of unnamed Egyptian people to take in these refugees from a thuggish regime. The Egyptians didn't ask Mary and Joseph if they shared the same faith as the majority of the Egyptian people. They didn't ask if they were worshipers of the Egyptian gods, they simply received them because it was the right thing to do and God thereby worked through them, those ancestors of our modern-day Muslim brothers and sisters fleeing unimaginable horror and slaughter in their land. *Make no mistake*: We know Jesus today because when He was a refugee from terror people took him in.

But what if that Egyptian government had said "no, we will 'protect our borders'"; what if those unnamed families and that unnamed town where they settled had not

welcomed Mary and Joseph and Mary and the baby? Well then – hear this! – God’s only Son would have died long before his time, long before his ministry, long before he would have had the chance to preach and teach the good news to the world. If the Holy Family hadn’t been welcomed back then and there, then you and I would not be Christian today because there would be no Christianity, no church, no Christmas, because the terror and the fear and the suspicion would have won. *Our Savior owes his earthly life to those who received Him and His family when they were refugees from terrorism.*

And so the terror and the fear and the suspicion didn’t win. They didn’t. The good news is that they didn’t. Which means, once again, the story confronts us with what kind of people we shall be and whom, in this story, we shall emulate in order to ourselves be God’s angels offering good news to the vulnerable, the scared, the victimized. Will we, as has happened too many times in history and is happening in too many places today, close our hearts? Or will we, those who worship a Savior whose life was saved by welcoming attitude of strangers, also show a welcoming attitude in turn? Will we one of God’s angels offering good news to those who hear shouted at them bad new? Or will we join the voices of those who have forgotten that their faith was made possible by the welcome of refugees? You see if we are to be God’s angels, God’s latter-day Gabriels, in our day and time, then the question is not whether those refugees needing our help are Christians, but whether you and I will be Christian.

The gray armadillo and the googly-eyed camel continued to grace our family’s nativity scene for many years. And I recall one time when a visitor to our home saw it, he was a bit startled, even a bit offended, it seems, and he said, “But those two don’t belong.” One of our children, wise beyond her years, said “Yes they do. Because didn’t the angel say, ‘I bring you good news which shall be for all’”? He did indeed. He did indeed. All. Even googly-eyed camels and lumpen armadillos, even refugees, even

you, even me.