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A New Nativity: II. Gabriel and Mary's Message

Luke 1:26b-35, 38, 46-55 The Message ...God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you. She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever- no end, ever, to his kingdom." Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man." The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. And Mary said, "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say." And Mary said, "I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened- I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others. His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

Our Advent sermon series this year is looking at the nativity scenes that accompany our Christmas decorations and imagining some of the other figures that are part of the Christmas story that could well be in those scenes but usually aren't. Last Sunday, the sermon looked at the genealogy of Jesus as the gospel of Matthew records it, a long passage of "begats" that we usually skip over. Yet we saw how that genealogy with all its saints and sinners truly makes Jesus who He is – the One who reveals a God whose unfailing and amazing grace is never absent and who is able to use all sorts of people whom we might write off or say are immoral to embody that grace. We saw that Matthew includes – unusual for that day and time – several women in his genealogy and thereby shows, again, that God's grace is always wider than our

biases. We saw that Matthew explicitly traces Jesus' lineage back to both Abraham and King David, thereby making the point that God continues to care for the people God chose and now in Jesus is making known to all of us the grace which the Jewish people knew and continue to know. And so we imagined in our mind's eye those 42 generations leading to Jesus crowded in and gathered around that Christmas cradle.

Today's scripture is about the angel Gabriel and Mary's response to the news he brings her. Now, you might be saying that Gabriel isn't exactly unknown and does in fact appear in many nativity scenes. Well, yes and no. Many such scenes often do have an angel in them, often precariously perched above that cattle stall. But usually that angel goes unnamed and often is a kind of stand-in for the host of angels who appeared to the shepherds. But Gabriel's appearance comes well before that – and without it, once again, Jesus wouldn't be Jesus. So let's look more closely at Gabriel's visit to Mary and will see why we might well explicitly include him in our expanded nativity scene.

This is actually Gabriel's second appearance in the story. The first time he comes to the Temple priest Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife – Mary's cousin – will have a son who will be John the Baptist. But what is important is that Gabriel opens his visit to Zechariah with exactly the same words that he uses later to Mary: *"Do not be afraid."* As I have said before, this is THE angelic message so often repeated in the New Testament. It is said to the shepherds and it is said by the angel at Jesus' tomb to those who came to pay their respects to the body. *"Do not be afraid."* So let's look more closely now at Gabriel's exchange with Mary and the message he has to bear, remembering that angels in the New Testament always and only bear good news. First, note Gabriel's initial greeting to Mary, as the NRSV translates it: *"Greetings, O favored one! The Lord is with you.."* This phrase "favored one" can also be translated

“the recipient of grace,¹ or as The Message has it “beautiful with God’s beauty.” And yet part of Mary’s initial reaction that Luke records – “*But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be*” – is more than a little understandable! Because as Gabriel continues the message of what God is going to do through Mary, I suspect that she is not just “perplexed,” but horrified! It certainly must not have felt, at least on first blush, like “grace” at all! It probably didn’t feel like being “favored.” It certainly may not have seemed a message of good news and of hope. Why? Well, Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant before marriage, she will be a teenage unwed mother, in a day and in a culture that found such not only shocking but a serious violation of the law. The fundamentalists of her day could have pointed to scripture and said “*She should be stoned to death.*” What will her family and fiancée think? In that day, an engagement to be married was a much more sweeping concept than in ours; an engagement meant that in every way except sexual relations the man and woman were to be considered married. So the message that Gabriel brings to Mary is **at best** perplexing and at worst appears to be the ruining of her life or even threatening to end it! It’s hard to imagine how this could have felt like grace or favor, don’t you think?

In fact, let’s linger here for just a moment. Take a look at your bulletin cover. It’s a painting by Gabriel Dante Rossetti, and the model who sat for the painting was his sister, Christina Rossetti. My wife, the Reverend Barbara Blaisdell, called it to my attention. Look at it with me. Christina as Mary is looking at the angel who has just given her the news that she is to bear Jesus into the world. Now, this was not a new subject for artists. But this painting was very different from most previous Annunciation paintings. Virtually always before, Mary had been portrayed sitting serenely, calmly and even beatifically looking at the angel with acceptance, and often regally clothed in royal

¹Dwight Gunter <http://www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/magdec02.htm>

blue. But in this painting, everything is different. As Barbara puts it, She's... sitting up in bed. It appears as if she's just been shaken out of sleep. And she is NOT wearing her serene virgin Mother of God blue but her wrinkled nightgown. And her hair, while it isn't exactly messy, it also isn't at all coifed [and] mostly hidden under a headscarf. And do you notice how she can't quite meet the angel's eyes? Here is not devout acceptance of her fate as portrayed in so many Mary paintings. This Mary is shaken! Perhaps afraid? Maybe hesitant? But most of all, stunned, dumbfounded!²

Why do I want to linger here? For two reasons. First, I take a huge comfort in this portrayal of Mary. For you see, there are too many folks who will tell you that a sign of faithfulness is to never question, never have doubts, never want to argue, especially with God. Their pious pronouncements can make you feel guilty that you don't have faith enough and that you should accept all things serenely and that you should do so instantly. Well, I think that's rubbish. Why? Well, to attribute to "God's will" absolutely everything that happens makes God a monster. You see, I don't want to "accept" mass shootings as an everyday occurrence. I don't want to "accept" that there is nothing that can be done about homelessness. I don't want to "accept" the staggering suicide rate among our veterans who have served our country. I don't believe it's God's will that some people must choose daily between food and medicine. I don't believe it's God's will when Christians are being brutally tortured and killed in too many places. These things are **not** God's will, and the God who rails against evil and injustice throughout the Bible does not want us to accept these things and does not want us to think that He somehow willed these things.

The second reason I want to linger on this portrait for a moment is that it depicts

²Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, "Comfort my People With Hope: In the Bleak Midwinter," a sermon preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, November 29, 2015. I'm also grateful to use her wording in the paragraph that precedes this quote.

the fact that when God tries to offer us new ways of thinking, a widening of our empathies, a shattering of our biases and prejudices, the reality is that it sometimes takes awhile for us to hear, to understand and to accept that God is trying to do a new and good thing in our lives. It reminds us that our God is not a God of coercion. What do I mean? Just this: *Mary could have said “no” to God.* God is not a tyrant. God does not force any of us to do His will. God would not have forced Mary to do so.

But of course after her moment of perplexity, pondering, and fear, Mary does indeed say yes and her words have rung down through the ages and have become known as “the Magnificat.” They are powerful and beautiful words. But they are disturbing ones too; as the NRSV has it: “[God] has... scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” Now, these are not the words of an over-sentimentalized, gauzy, gooey, warm-and-fuzzy Hallmark Channel Christmas where everyone is happy and all presents are just right and there is no strife among families or nations. I daresay that you will not find Mary’s words on any Christmas card. For these are, in fact, *revolutionary* words. They are not just some soothing soporific that can be set to song, but can be powerful and revolutionary beyond imagining. For example, in the early 19th century, the “Archbishop of Canterbury warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. ... [because these verses are] so inflammatory.”³ You can read sermons on this scripture from the 1800s that were preached by white ministers and slaveowners, but those slaves were invariably “reminded” that these words were purely “spiritual,” and did not refer in any way to this world but only somehow to the heavenly bye-and-bye.

“*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.*” Why? Mary goes on to tell us why: because God looked kindly upon a lowly peasant girl in an

³Quoted at http://www.lectionarysermons.com/decem_2400.htm

insignificant middle eastern village.. But God did not look kindly upon Mary alone. Mary's song reminds us that that God has also looked kindly upon **all** those who have suffered, **all** who have known the grind of poverty, **all** those who have thought themselves unworthy. Mary sings for all of these ones, and God intends to work toward a more just world for them. Do these words make you uncomfortable? They do me. They say that God will send away the rich, the proud, the self-satisfied, the too-comfortable. And they are discomfoting words, because I know that I can sometimes be described in all those ways. Because, as Barbara once eloquently pointed out⁴ and as you can be reminded of by the graphic on page 11 of your bulletin, even the poorest among us in this room on this day are far, far richer than most of the world. For if we have a coat at all, let alone a second or third or fourth coat; if we have a roof over our heads, and if we are pretty sure where our next meal is coming from, then we are fabulously rich in comparison with most of the world. And when Mary sings "*God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,*" I realize that all of us have been known to take pride in what we have done supposedly on our own, of how much we've accomplished and accumulated, of how much we did it by ourselves and with no one's help. Yet Mary's words tell us otherwise, and are a reminder that what we celebrate at Christmas **has** to include God's promised justice through Christ for **all** of God's children. This means that while we surely hope that the warmth we find in our winter coat will not be taken from us, it is nonetheless warmth that is to be shared with all those who shiver. Mary's words mean that the joy we experience in giving gifts to our families and friends is a joy that God wants everyone to know. And Mary's words are a reminder to us that we dare not celebrate this season, that we dare not welcome Christmas, without a willingness and a commitment to do our part to help God make

⁴I am grateful once gain to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell both for the content of this paragraph and some of its wording as well.. This inspiration and borrowing comes from her sermon "A Love That Magnifies," preached at United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii on December 16, 2007.

these things so.

So Mary's song, occasioned by Gabriel's visit, a visit which rightfully could well be included in our nativity scenes, leaves you and me with a question this morning. How can **we** sing Mary's song with her this day, how can **we** truly help imagine a different world? For God **is** asking something of you and me in this and every moment. God is trying to announce how your life can even better serve God's hope for this world. God has indeed chosen, as the Christmas carol has it, "poor ornery people like you and like I." How will **you and I** answer God?