

"Great Expectations"

An Advent Sermon on Luke 1:26-38

First Presbyterian Church, Elkhart IN

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Prayer of Illumination

Holy God, God of Advent, as we prepare to hear Your word, quiet our hearts, calm them from busy thoughts about things we have yet to do in this harried season, and turn them to contemplation of what You have done for us.

As Mary yielded herself to Your messenger, so let us yield ourselves to Your message.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Introduction:

Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you.

Those were the words with which the angel Gabriel greeted the young woman Mary. This morning we explore a bit what those words meant to her – and what they might mean to you and me as well.

We are in the gospel of Luke, who, of course, starts his account of the Christmas story well before Jesus' birth, with an account of the annunciation to Zechariah and Elizabeth of the impending birth of John the Baptist. Then Luke turns to the annunciation to Mary, our text for today. Listen for God's word to you...

Scripture:

S: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said,

L: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

S: But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her,

L: *"Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

S: Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her,

L: *"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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."*

S: Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Message:

Although the early church developed traditions of the "back-story" of Mary, including the names of her parents and that she was "immaculately conceived" (that is, without original sin), the gospels of Matthew and Luke themselves have none of that. We first encounter her in this story of the annunciation, and know nothing more about her. Scholars tell us she would probably have been in her early teens, because that's the age at which most women were betrothed, but we don't know that for sure. It is likely that her betrothal to Joseph was arranged by her father, because that's how it was done, but we don't know that, either.

So, as far as we know from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mary was just an ordinary young woman, a girl, really. It is possible that she was the semi-divine image of perfection portrayed in the Roman Catholic tradition, but the gospels don't tell us that. As far as we know, she was just an ordinary girl, living an ordinary life. She was like us – going about her daily life, filled with her own hopes and dreams, worries and anxieties. If her father had matched her to Joseph, Mary probably didn't know Joseph all that well, as he was probably somewhat older than she was. So she was probably full of anxieties about what life would bring her. She was completely unprepared for a visitation by an Angel, a messenger from God. And especially by an angel with such a distressing message.

Favored by God? What kind of favor was this? She was to become pregnant? As a virgin? Before having marital relations with her betrothed? It was not only scandalous, it was dangerous. Such an event – a girl betrothed becoming pregnant by someone other than her fiancé – was considered adultery. It was likely to bring her anything from shame to scorn to stoning. And it was impossible, for she was a virgin. So she questioned the Angel: how can this be? The Angel provided little detail – distressingly little detail, from Mary's perspective – and assured her that "with God, all things are possible." And this, somehow, was enough for her: she yielded and acquiesced to God's plan.

The focus of this story is, first of all, Jesus – what it tells us about who He was, God's only begotten Son, the Incarnation of God in human flesh. It is also about Mary, whether one sees her as "Mother Mary" in the Catholic tradition, as many Protestants see her, as the "first disciple," a model of trust and faith under distressing circumstances. But this story is ultimately about God. And it is on God's role that I want to focus.

But first, a minor digression. As you know, if you have listened to my preaching for a while, I am interested in politics. Yes, I have my candidates and my favored policies – you will be pleased that I won't elaborate on that – but I am also fascinated by the contest, the strategies employed by the various candidates, the "horse-race" aspects of political campaigns. And one of the features I note in this year's presidential campaign is a strong sense of disappointment on both sides. Many on the Democratic side are disappointed in various aspects of the President's performance; many on the Republican side are disappointed with many, or perhaps all, of the candidates.

I raise this not for political discussion, but because it reminds us of the fallible nature of humanity. These are our present and would-be leaders, presumably the best and the brightest. Why so many short-comings, so many flaws? Do not their very failings reflect our own?

The first Sunday of Advent, I preached on the passage from Isaiah 64 in which the prophet, after reflecting on the many failings of his people, sought, almost plaintively to remind God that God made us: *Yet, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand.* I spoke about how we all are "cracked pots," women and men fashioned in the image of God, and yet who are full of faults and foibles and failings. Women and men who persistently fail to live up to God's expectations, who disappoint God, disappoint those we love, disappoint even ourselves. But, despite our sin and selfishness, God's love transcends our failings. God, as revealed in Christ, loves and accepts us as we are.

In this story of the Annunciation, we are reminded that God is not only accepts us despite our faults and sin, but God sees in us more than we see ourselves. When God decided to introduce a new plan to save the world, God didn't just magically zap things. Rather, God invited people to participate in God's plan. Ordinary people. Just as Jesus, when He began His ministry, invited – never compelled or commanded – ordinary people to follow Him. The Christmas story is not only the story of Jesus' birth; is the story of others, common people, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and magi. Somehow God seemed to trust these men and women to do extraordinary things, to bear and raise, and bear witness to, the Son of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor, talking about this story, uses an arresting phrase: that Mary smuggled God into the world in her own body.* Though the particular call to Mary and Joseph was unique, yet it both showed and symbolized how God continues to call people. God's plan of salvation, God's intent to save the world in many different ways, still depends on human agency. That is to say, it depends on the willingness of surprised and unqualified men and women to "smuggle God into the world."

What do I mean?

I am suggesting that, whenever you act in a Kingdom way, choosing to act as Christ calls us to act, even when it's not in your own selfish interests to do so, you "smuggle God" into that situation. When you are patient with an annoying relative, when you forgive a friend who has wronged you, when you are generous in giving to the poor or the church, when you act lovingly towards someone who is "unlovable," you are smuggling God into this situation. Whenever you repay anger with gentleness, react to violence with peace, respond to hatred with love, you are saying "yes" to God's call, bringing God into this world. This doesn't mean we have to talk about Jesus all the time, or sound like Christian television. But it does mean we have to pay attention to how we act.

And you never know what profound consequences your "small" acts may have. The kind word you say, the listening ear you lend, even the poinsettia you deliver to a homebound person, may be just the action needed to bring hope into despair, a sense of connection into loneliness.

The famous mystic Meister Eckhart (14th century) once wrote:

We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.

I invite you, as you prepare for your holiday celebration, whether with family or friends or otherwise, consider how to become one of God's "secret agents," smuggling God's grace and love into every interaction. God's choice of Mary suggests that none of us are safe from God's call and, however unworthy, inexperienced, or in adequate we may feel, yet God sees in us potential for good, possibilities for love, capacity for generosity and grace beyond what we may see in ourselves.

How may God be calling you specifically this Advent and Christmas. What voices might you here, beyond the Christmas music in stores, or even the carols in church, what voices may be summoning you to help smuggle God's love, God's mercy, God's hope and good news into this dark and troubled world?

Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you.

Amen.

* Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications 1995, p. 193.