

December 18, 2016
Luke 1:26-38
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“God Face-To-Face”

The angel Gabriel’s visitation to Mary is a familiar but bewildering part of the Christmas story. Mary was engaged to Joseph. Engagement in that time lasted for one year, was as binding as marriage, and could only be dissolved by divorce or death. But engagement was not a time for having babies.

So here is this teenage girl, recently engaged, who is greeted by an angel with baffling and terrifying news. She, Mary, was selected to birth the Messiah foretold by prophets. Gabriel assured her, “God is with you; you have found favor with God; do not be afraid; nothing is impossible with God.” How could anyone take all this in at once? The idea of pregnancy had frightening consequences to a young engaged woman. It baffles me to understand how she could say, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The story of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is beautiful. There is something about Mary’s real emotion and yet obedience that tugs at our hearts. Hearing that cousin Elizabeth, old in years, was also pregnant, Mary ran to her for help to untangle this mystery. Meanwhile, Joseph received a visit from the angel telling him to take Mary as his wife. So here we have three people called to take part in a mystery with real consequences. Yet, why is it we read nothing in scripture of such consequences taking place?

Human conception

The *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*¹ says it was common among Greek-speaking Jews (Luke was Greek) to believe in miraculous

¹ Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible. David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 573.

events surrounding the birth of prominent persons. The Jews had a saying that in the birth of every child there are three partners -- the father, the mother and the Spirit of God. They believed that no child could ever be born without the Spirit. Psalm 139 describes the mystery of our embryonic life with these wonderful words: “you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” While biological science may explain these processes, there is still an awesomeness and mystery to be embraced in the miracle of life.”² Ask any parent who has had a baby.

Peter Lockhart reminds us that when Luke wrote down the story 60 years after the event, he “portrayed this intimate scene between Mary and an angel called Gabriel. No one else was present and no one else wrote the story down in the same way,” including Matthew. This has been the source of controversy for centuries. So how do we understand this story? All we need to know is that Mary had a baby who grew up to change the world.

Peter Lockhart suggests, “The purpose of Luke’s story is neither to claim the historicity of the encounter between the angel and Mary . . . nor to provide a scientific explanation concerning the virginal conception. Luke’s task is theology: to explain who God is and how this God relates to human beings and human beings relate to God. This is where the authority of the scriptures lies.”³

Lockhart continues, “It is fascinating to me that Mary moves from a place of questioning and fear, into obedience and acceptance, and then, when she visits Elizabeth, [she is moved] to give praise and thanksgiving to God.”⁴ It was in the sharing of her story with Elizabeth that Mary responded in the song known as the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” “Even as Mary found it difficult to comprehend and accept what God

² Peter Lockhart, “The Annunciation: a theological insight to God’s life with us.”

<http://revplockhart.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-annunciation-theological-insight-to.html>

³ Lockhart

⁴ Lockhart.

might be doing, the reality is that any encounter with God” can lead us to ask, “How can this be?”⁵

Paintings of the annunciation and birth of Jesus

I spent some time looking at paintings of the Annunciation and birth of Jesus on the internet. Most of those from past centuries are posed and artificial, void of any feeling, portraying Mary with a halo or holding a book we take to be the scriptures. Few of them capture Mary as a teenager. Most of these paintings do nothing for me, but I saved several that show Mary as an ordinary girl. It was in Mary’s quiet, non-remarkable, day-to-day life that she found favor with God. I also included Tom Clark’s paintings that show an ordinary disheveled mother exhausted from childbirth, but face transformed with joy and love as she snuggles the baby against her, rubbing his back. It is the ordinary father standing nearby with a goofy grin of pride on his face, the appearance of a curious innkeeper come to see what was going on, and the wise men come from far to honor this special baby.⁶

From hardcopy to F2F

One writer shows the progression of God’s longing for relationship with us. From the beginning of time, God has been actively seeking a way to say, “I love you.” First it was hardcopy. Then it was voice mail. And finally it was face-to-face. The hardcopy -- literally hard -- were the Ten Commandments etched on stone that stated, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” “It wasn’t a rusty set of rules, but a powerful and passionate love letter from the one true God. But the people went their own way and the stones became cracked.

So God sent the prophets -- Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and eventually John the Baptist, but they were ignored, berated, beaten or killed. Finally God came to us face-to-face in the birth of Jesus. Gabriel announced his coming, Mary accepted the challenge, and John the Baptist identified him as the Messiah. Jesus was conceived in a particular time and place, to a particular mother. The baby was given a particular name and mission. In the coming of Jesus, God and

⁵ Lockhart.

⁶ Author unknown. “Ordinarily sacred,” a sermon from www.homileticonline.com

humans met face-to-face.⁷ We are also called to birth and cradle Christ in our own lives.

The *New Interpreter's Bible* says, "God has not abandoned us to the consequences of our own sinfulness. [Jesus] enters human life with all its depravity, violence and corruption, and demonstrates that he is determined to deliver us. His very existence -- as a living breathing person -- is a message of hope for humankind."⁸ There are some powerful Latin words in Mozart's "Requiem" which translated say, "Remember, merciful Jesus/I am the cause of your journey."

During this Advent season we have been emphasizing the theme, "God with us for the ages." As *The Message* states it in John 1:14, "The word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Emmanuel is "God with us" in the flesh, with open arms and hands.

There's a story I know you have heard before, but it fits so well it is worth repeating and pondering.

"There was a Benedictine community to whom nobody came. As the monks grew old, they became more and more disheartened because their community was not attracting other people.

Now in the woods outside the monastery there lived an old rabbi. People came from all over to talk to him about the presence of Yahweh in creation. Years went by and finally the abbot himself went into the woods, leaving word with his monks, "I have gone out to speak to the rabbi." In truth, the abbot considered it humiliating that a Christian community had to go back to the synagogue to find out what was wrong with them."

When the abbot finally found the rabbi's hut in the woods, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms as if he had known that he was coming. They put their arms around each other and had a good cry. The abbot told the rabbi that his monks were good men but they had lost their fire, and the community was dying. He asked the rabbi if he had any insight into the work of Yahweh in their lives. The rabbi

⁷ Author unknown, "Go to voice, then F2F," a sermon www.homileticonline.com

⁸ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 51-53. Abingdon Press, 1995.

replied, "I have the secret and I will tell you once. You may tell the monks and then none of you is ever to repeat it to another." The abbot declared that if they could have the secret, he was sure his monks would grow.

The rabbi looked at him long and hard, then said, "The secret is that among you, in one of you is the Messiah!" The abbot went back to his community and shared the secret with his monks. And lo! as they began to search for the Messiah in one another they grew, they loved, they became strong and very prophetic. And the story ends: "From that day on, the community saw [the Messiah] in one another and flourished!"⁹

It's true that in our time and space we no longer see Jesus in human form, face-to-face. But "the Good News is that God has given us one another, the body of Christ, and made us . . . family in the Spirit of God."¹⁰ As the monks discovered, when we observe the Messiah in each other, relationships will flourish, and others will be attracted to the likeness of God in us. So, brothers and sisters, let us continue the work of Jesus, looking for God in each other, sharing the news that "God with us," and building the kingdom of God, peacefully, simply, together. Amen.

⁹ Story told by Joan D. Chittister, OSB, *Living the Rule Today: a series of conference on the Rule of Benedict* (Erie, Pa.: Benet Press, 1982), 98-99, as quoted on pp. 82-83 of Wolff-Walin.

¹⁰ Edward J. Preston.