



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 14, 2014
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

Reflections of Joy: The Angels Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-10; Luke 1:26-38

During this season of Advent, we have been thinking about “Christmas Reflections” and wondering about the thoughts various characters in the Christmas story might have had as God’s story unfolded. We looked at the prophets who were challenged to keep hope alive for the Jewish people. The shepherds heard the news of Jesus’ birth and felt such love that they were compelled to worship the newborn Savior. Today we just heard the familiar message of Gabriel as he informed Mary that she was to bring the Messiah into the world.

We know what Mary thought upon hearing this news. Many translations tell us that Mary was “troubled” by the greeting of the angel Gabriel. I am not surprised. How would you react if an angel suddenly appeared and started talking to you? Not only would I be “troubled,” I would be downright scared. Perhaps that is a more accurate depiction of how Mary responded to the angel’s sudden arrival. However, that greeting was nothing compared to the message he was about to deliver.

After telling her to not be afraid (sound familiar?), Gabriel told Mary that she had found favor with God. Then, rather quickly, he informed her that she would have a child named Jesus who would reign over the Jewish people. Mary reacted with skepticism—and who wouldn’t? She was not married and had never been with a man. Perhaps there was a mistake. The angel had contacted the wrong Mary. But Gabriel assured her that she was the one God had chosen and that the child would be of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God. To emphasize his legitimacy, he told her that her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was elderly and had never had children, was already expecting a child.

Scripture tells us how the young woman Mary reacted to the angel’s news. She was frightened, apprehensive, confused, and perplexed. Then her fear gave way to acceptance and her humility erupted into gratitude and praise over God’s choosing her for this honor. We know how Mary reacted, but what do you suppose went through the angel’s mind when he was given this task?

Gabriel is mentioned only a few times in scripture. He was God's messenger and was sent to interpret two different visions for Daniel who was exiled in Babylon. Gabriel was also sent to Zechariah, a priest of God, to tell him that his wife Elizabeth (Mary's kinswoman) would have a child in her old age whom they would name John. In extra-biblical literature, Gabriel has a special relationship with humans. He stands guard over paradise after Adam and Eve are expelled. He intercedes for humans whenever necessary and handles judgement for fallen angels. In the New Testament, as we have seen, Gabriel represents the presence of the Lord.¹

Obviously, Gabriel served as a special envoy for God. He had dealt with humans from the beginning and understood how we act, react, and think. Gabriel was trusted by God to deal with God's special creation: you and me.

Imagine God calling Gabriel into the heavenly home office to say, "I have a special job for you. I want you to go to the priest Zechariah. He is serving in the temple now. He and his wife have long prayed for a child and I want you to tell him that his wife will conceive and have a son. And I want them to name him, 'John.' It worked for Abraham and Sarah with a few kinks. Hopefully we can work those out this time."

A few months later, God calls Gabriel back into his office to send another message, this time to a young maiden in Nazareth. "Gabriel," he said, "You handled delivering that news to Zechariah well so I have another task for you. Go to the little town of Nazareth and find a young woman named Mary. I want you to tell her that she is going to have a child." "Shouldn't I be talking to her husband as I did with Abraham and Zechariah?" Gabriel asked. "No, not at this time," God answered. "My business is with her. Besides, although she is engaged, she is not yet married." "Forgive me for questioning you, Lord, but isn't this approach a bit extreme? I have watched over the humans for a long time. I know how they think about such matters. Imagine the talk, the scandal for this young woman. There will be serious consequences." "You are right, Gabriel," said God, "but this child will be different. This child will be my son, the Messiah. Trust me that everything will work out."

Thrilled to hear this good news that the Messiah was finally being sent to earth, Gabriel left immediately to carry out his assignment. He was excited

¹G.E. Ladd, "Gabriel," *The New Bible Dictionary*, J.D. Douglas, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962): 445.

but he knew this young maiden would be greatly upset—and why not? Her life was about to change in a significant way. How could he tell her this news so as not to frighten her? How could he convince her it was good news before she panicked and did something rash. And what about her fiancé? God had mentioned she was engaged. Should he speak to this man as well and reassure him that this pregnancy was a miracle and not a breach of their commitment to one another? After all, their lives were about to change—the world was about to change!

Like the angel Gabriel, we sometimes have news to share that is ultimately good but may be immediately unsettling. How do you share good news that may not sound so positive when someone else first hears it?

Years ago, when we shared with our then young children the news that we were considering a move from Warrenton to Rocky Mount, they were not immediately thrilled. Robert was ten years old and Catherine was seven. Warrenton was the only home she could remember. It was where her life was rooted. Robert considered Savannah his hometown, but his friends were all in Warrenton. We had a challenge on our hands.

We began to talk about the church and to describe how beautiful it is, how wonderful the people are, the new friends they would make here, and the neat playground that is out back. We described Rocky Mount and told them of the many restaurants that are here (Warrenton had only three—four if you counted the hot dog joint just outside of town.) We mentioned that there was a Dunkin' Donuts AND a Krispy Kreme in addition to movie theaters, a skating rink, a bowling alley, and a children's museum. Their response was, "Well, maybe we should check it out."

The key to sharing good news that may not sound so good on first hearing is to get someone to be willing to at least "check it out." When God opens a new door for us, we ought to at least step inside and see what God is offering. Gabriel approached Mary in such a way as to convey his overwhelming joy over what God was doing as well as his concern for her and his assurance that God would be with her.

I personally do not know anyone who has had Gabriel or any other angel appear to them with a message from God, but I know many people who have been blessed by friends who have spoken God's truth to them. I know other people who have been God's messengers to the rest of us.

Whether or not we have interpreted it in religious terms or not, most of us have felt a calling to a particular career or volunteer activity or artistic hobby. Likely someone encouraged us in that pursuit along the way. They may have been the teacher or the boss or the instructor who pushed us through the period of learning and training and trial and error that accompanies most vocational pursuits. I believe those people are God's messengers.

Often God provides new opportunities for us that may involve changing careers, leaving behind comfortable routines, and establishing new relationships. Sometimes we are called to move to other towns, even to other states or countries to fulfill God's call. Such moves, while exciting, can also be frightful and difficult.

More often than not, God sends us messengers who will attempt to help us get through some challenging time in life or to make significant changes in our own way of looking at life. I have shared with you before the manner in which the chaplain at Furman challenged my immature and narrow faith in God when he encouraged me to use my mind as well as my heart in serving God. Rarely have I been as angry and upset with someone over a message they have delivered; yet, today I am eternally grateful that "Gabriel" who cared enough to speak truth to me and to do so in a way that his joyful faith carried the message with grace and compassion.

Joy is not always an over-the-top exuberance. Sometimes joy is that inner sense of well-being that causes you to find the good in everything. Sometimes joy is the persistent delight in what you love to do despite the challenges and hardships along the way. Oftentimes joy is the simple recognition that God is with you and in every circumstance along the way so that you never feel alone or panicked. Always joy is the delight in life knowing that we are all held in God's loving hands.

At some point, perhaps on numerous occasions, God will send a Gabriel to us who will deliver good news that may not, at first blush, seem so good. In the same way, we may find that God has tapped us to go to a child, a friend, a co-worker, or someone else to convey God's truth to them. In those times, like Gabriel, we should focus on the good, allow the joy of our faith to touch the other person, and, above all, remind the one receiving the news that the Lord is with them. As Mary discovered, that news in itself is cause for joy. May it be so for us all. Amen.

December 14, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Our hearts swell with joy and gratitude, Generous God, for gifts that flow from you with such extravagance that we cannot keep track: for the splendor of angel songs that heralded the birth and transformed unsuspecting shepherds into evangelists of the wondrous news; for a radical, unfailing love that refuses to abandon your children to a frightening world; for the promise of life that challenges the finality of death; for joy in community and kindred that brings meaning to our days; for your stubborn grace that pursues us and calls us to be messengers of your mercy; for blessings not counted because we lose sight of them in the midst of our plenty; and for the birth of the One who comes to live and to die in order to redeem us. For all these gifts that come forth from your gracious hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

But we confess, O Lord, that too often we have mistaken the generosity of your gifts for a license to excess. We have thought ourselves deserving while looking in judgment on those who do not know the status or comforts we enjoy. We have considered ourselves hospitable but have failed to welcome those whose customs or languages or religions are unknown to us. We have lauded our own accomplishments without recognizing that every success we achieve is a result of your provision of ability or opportunity or energy. Forgive us, O God, and in this season of preparation and celebration, give us a renewed vision of your grace.

Make us generous, Holy God, not only to those we hold dear or those we want to impress, but also to those we will never meet and who cannot repay our kindness. Fill our time not only with parties and appointments and obligations, but also with quiet solitude and meaningful reflection. Give us joy—not only the laughter and cheer of the season, but also, and especially, the true and enduring joy that transcends our circumstances and which we discover by the Light of the One who has come to dispel our darkness. Holy Child of Bethlehem, bring joy to us and to our world, and show us the way. This is our prayer, our plea, for this day and for all our days to come. Amen.

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