



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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Hope Breaks In  
Galatians 3:23-29, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

For seventeen days last summer, the entire world was captivated by the plight of twelve boys and their soccer coach who were trapped in a cave in Thailand. On June 23 after practice, the group decided to go on a little excursion to explore the nearby caves, something the coach and two of the boys had done before, and planned to stay only an hour. But while they were inside, monsoon rains began to fall, and the path out quickly became flooded. The coach, who had taken some rope and a flashlight with them, tried to find a way out, but the boys had to pull him back from the rising water. So they moved to higher ground and waited.

The group survived for ten days by drinking fresh water that was dripping from the rocks above them, and the coach kept the boys calm and hopeful by teaching them to meditate and to pray. And then, on July 2, weak from a lack of food and beginning to lose hope that they would be found, they heard splashing and a voice speaking in English. Two divers from the British Cave Rescue Council were pulling safety rope through the flood waters and popped up in a cavern, shocked to find all thirteen young men huddled on a small beach in the darkness.

Prior to that moment, the group didn't know if anyone knew where to search for them, let alone realize that more than 3,000 rescuers from around the world had mobilized to find them. And the rescuers, who were assembled when the boys' bicycles were found outside the cave, certainly did not expect to find the entire group safe and well. There would be another full week of planning and working and praying, and Thai Navy SEAL Saman Gunan would lose his own life in the rescue effort, but on July 10, with the prayers and attention of the world focused on the mouth of that cave, all thirteen were pulled to safety.

"We learned about love by receiving love from everyone," said one of the boys, 14-year-old Adul Samon. "I feel like people around the world are my parents."<sup>1</sup>

For a few days last July, we were all the parents of those boys. There were no nationalities or languages, no religions or ideologies to divide us, as hope broke through the flood waters in Thailand, and thirteen precious young lives were saved.

On the front of today's Order of Worship, you can see the painting of "The Annunciation" by the 16th century Venetian artist, Jacopo Tintoretto. His depiction captures the moment in Luke's account when Gabriel has just appeared and Mary "was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29). Mary, who appears to have been busy at work, with a basket of yarn at her feet and fabric on the table, is clearly caught off guard by the angel bursting into the room, preceded by the Holy Spirit and surrounded by the heavenly host. I think I might have been just a little shocked by such an encounter, too!

About a week ago, my dear college friend, Dr. Madhuri Yadlapati, who teaches world religions at Louisiana State University, shared this painting with me, along with her comment that this is her favorite representation of the Annunciation because it shows "the everyday household scene and the angel crashing through the wall, disrupting everything." What an appropriate description, not only of this painting, but also of the entire experience of Christmas: In the coming of the Christ child, God has broken into our everyday world and disrupted everything!

It is the First Sunday of Christmas, and we gather in joyful celebration of the birth of the One who has broken into our world bringing hope, love, joy, and peace for us all. We have spent four weeks watching and waiting, preparing and anticipating, but I'm left wondering what difference Christ's coming will make. Will we enjoy the season as something sentimental or nostalgic, albeit beautiful and meaningful, only to return to our regular routines and our same old ways of doing and being in the world? Or will we receive the astounding gift of Christ eagerly, opening ourselves to a radical encounter with the God who comes to dwell among us, an encounter which just may turn everything upside down?

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"Boys rescued from Thai cave 'overwhelmed' when divers first arrived," By Bill Hutchinson and James Longman, Aug 22, 2018, ABC News

In the reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, we sense his frustration that these believers have professed faith in Christ but haven't yet grasped the seismic shift in their thinking and behavior that their new faith demands. They want to hold on to their old beliefs and customs, which were designed to distinguish insiders from outsiders in the religious community. These so-called Judaizers want to cling to familiar rituals that have defined their identity and protect the established structures by requiring new believers to convert to Judaism before they can become full members of the Church. But Paul proclaims that the coming of Jesus has broken down those divisions which we have used to stratify the community and separate ourselves from one another. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," Paul writes.

Paul knows from his personal experience, as well as from counseling churches struggling with the growing pains of new faith, that in the coming of Jesus who was "born of a woman, born under the law," if we fully embrace what it means for God to become one of us, it will not necessarily be orderly or easy. The Word of God has come to dwell among us in the person of Jesus in order to show solidarity with us, to share kinship in the vulnerability of life, and to participate fully in our humanity, in order to redeem our humanity.

But when the Word of God appears, it is not the peaceful, sanitized version we envision with our manger scenes and twinkling lights. When the Word of God appears, the encounters are rarely represented as "angelic" at all—at least not in the way we imagine, with shimmering robes and golden halos, floating on clouds and the tranquil melodies of harps. It seems to me that whenever a divine messenger shows up proclaiming God's word and says, "Do not be afraid," it is because something that would strike fear in the hearts of the most courageous among us is about to happen!

Mary was right to be startled, perplexed, perhaps even frightened at the angel's message. Whether in the announcement of the angel, the proclamation of John the Baptist, or the Incarnation of Jesus, when the Word of God appears, it breaks into our world, disrupting our routines and assumptions, breaking down the walls built to protect power or maintain an illusion of control but which divide us from one another and from God.

When the Word of God appears, social orders are challenged, questions are answered with more questions, and we are uprooted from our positions of ease and complacency. When the Word of God appears, the experience is much more like the one Tintoretto has depicted and my friend

has described: crashing into our everyday lives that are controlled and comfortable, and disrupting everything.

When the Word of God appears, then, absolutely everything changes. We may find long-held beliefs shattered, prejudices challenged, and loyalties wavering. What were once issues to be analyzed and positions to be decided are now people to be loved and justice to be sought. Ideologies that were once rigid may become mysteries to be embraced, and retribution that was once owed becomes grace to be given. While that is ultimately good news—the BEST news—for all of us, it may also be unsettling or even threatening, because if we encounter and embrace it fully, the Word of God breaking into our midst may just challenge and change us most of all.

On July 18 of this year, 20-year-old college student, Mollie Tibbetts, disappeared while jogging near her home in Brooklyn, Iowa. After a month-long search, police identified 24-year-old Cristhian Bahena Rivera, who is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, as a suspect, using surveillance camera footage that showed his car following her on her jog. Rivera has confessed to Mollie's kidnapping and murder and is awaiting trial.

In the aftermath of his arrest, politicians and pundits erupted in a cacophony of accusations and rhetoric, further fueling the heated immigration debate in our country. Attention was focused on the local dairy farm, owned by the family of a prominent Iowa politician, where Rivera and several other Mexican immigrants lived and worked. The farm and its workers began to receive hate mail, threatening phone calls, and racist targeting from a local white supremacist group.

But while the frenzy of political debate and division swirled across the country, Laura Calderwood, the mother of Mollie Tibbetts, tried quietly and privately to mourn the death of her daughter and to shield her 17-year-old son Scott. Soon after his sister's funeral, Scott came to his mother with an unusual request. His friend and teammate Ulises, who had lived near Cristhian Rivera on the same farm where Ulises' parents also worked, needed a place to live. Laura asked her son what had happened to Ulises' family and learned that, because of the threats, the immigrant families who worked on the farm, including Ulises' parents, were fleeing. Ulises was a high school senior and didn't want to leave the only community, the only friends he had ever known. Laura said she had only to think for a moment about what her daughter would want and how she could best honor Mollie's life, and she immediately moved Ulises into the spare bedroom in their home where he continues to live. Laura Calderwood will never fill the void left by her daughter's death, but by welcoming and caring for the child of another family

split apart by this senseless act of violence, instead of bitterness and hatred, she has found hope breaking into her life and into the life of a boy she now loves as one of her own children.

In the coming of Jesus, God, in his infinite mercy, broke through the darkness of our hopelessness and fear, our hatred and divisions, our pride and greed, because we had lost our way and needed rescuing. But as John describes so eloquently in the prologue to his Gospel, God didn't stand at a safe distance and simply toss in a life preserver to pull us out. Because of his great love for us, God didn't remain separated from his creation, hurling warnings and pronouncements of judgment from on high. No, in the coming of Jesus, God became one of us and descended into the darkness and chaos of our world to lead us toward the light of God's presence. The promise we receive is not that the coming of Jesus will free us from our pain or fears or hatred entirely, at least not yet. Instead, we find our hope in the promise that the gifts of life and light offered to us through Christ will illuminate the path in order for us to see our way toward the hope of reconciliation and the joy of new life, and these gifts are such that the darkness in our world can never extinguish them. Thanks be to God! Amen.

O God who became flesh and dwelt among us, we rejoice in the faithfulness you have shown to your people throughout the ages, and yet, as we celebrate Christ's coming once again, we continue to be surprised by the persistence of your love for us, by the abundance of your blessings to us, and by the extravagant demonstration of your grace in the sending of your Son. We give you thanks for the comfort we find in familiar words and music and in meaningful traditions. We give you thanks for the grace of family and friends, for memories shared and gifts given. Most of all, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son who comes to transform our hearts, to move us from our comfortable places, and to renew our spirits. In our gratitude, grant to us a spirit of generosity and compassion. Help us to share all that you have given to us and to remember that you are the source of all that we have and all that we are.

In this season when we have lit our candles and sung our praises, we pray, Lord Jesus, that your presence would break into our world with the good news of your grace once again. Break through our darkness with the light that will illumine our path toward you. Break into our world to overcome despair with a hope that does not disappoint. Break into our minds with a peace which passes our understanding and quiets our restlessness. Break into our lives to drive our fear with a joy which speaks to everyone we encounter of the new life you offer. Break into our hearts to vanquish hate with a love so deep and wide and broad and high that it breaks down barriers to welcome all our sisters and brothers in the human family. With all heaven and nature, let us sing and shout and speak our faith that the coming of Christ brings renewal and reconciliation for all the world. We pray in the name of the One who comes to bring us abundant and joyful life now and hope for all our days to come, and we offer our prayers by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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