

The Reality of Christmas

Luke 1:26-38

Advent 4, 2011

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, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, 'Do not 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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, '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.'

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.

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There was a time...not very long ago...when women and men who felt called into the ministry would be examined by committees who used the passage we just heard, and it's reference to the virgin birth, as a measuring stick to determine how just how orthodox a potential pastor was when it came to a literal reading of the words of scripture.

There was a time...a little bit longer ago...when the different expressions within the Church fought bitterly over what to make of Mary. Mary, Jesus' mother; Mary, the *theotokos* (God-bearer): was she ~just~ a woman? Was she a saint? Was she to be worshipped?

There is a time...yes, right now...when the body of Christ continues to divide into smaller and smaller pockets of like-minded believers; where the most important qualification of belonging to a church is not whether you want to follow Jesus, but instead whether or not you **believe** the right way about the right things that are defined by the right people.

Next week, as he does about every year around Christmas, a former professor of mine at the University of North Carolina will be a guest of Teri Gross on "Fresh Air." Dr. Bart Ehrman, professor of New Testament, will, no doubt, describe to his listeners the many inconsistencies made within the Christian tradition when it comes to exactly how Jesus was born into the world. Dr. Ehrman will point out that the gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, disagree about just who was in Jesus' family tree; he will alert listeners that the ancient manuscripts of these gospels evidence editorializing on the part of the early church to make them fit the interests of the fledgling Christian religion.

Next week, about the time Dr. Ehrman is speaking on "Fresh Air" you and I will likely be caught up in the mania of last-minute preparation. School is out – which means that school children will be home! Family is either here, or they are coming here, which means that there is food to prepare, presents to wrap, and bathrooms to clean!

And in between it all –

Between the way the Church continues to prevail upon the good news of God's word by shoehorning it into systems of belief that are intended to distinguish the right from the wrong.

Between our skepticism about God's word because it doesn't fit within our rational, learned sensibilities.

Between the busyness of our life that – especially this time of year – is so often out of balance and overly focused on keeping up appearances and meeting expectations.

In between all of that, we might miss what we have just heard. We might miss the fact that what Luke describes...in this exchange between Gabriel and Mary...tells us something about the way that God takes a role in our salvation by getting involved in the stuff of history.

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A good preacher friend of mine from Georgia, whose reflections on today's scripture have provoked me to see it in a different light, makes the point that so often, in our haste: to uncover the true meaning of the scripture, or apply the lesson of scripture to our lives, or search for the ways that the scriptures back up our understanding (and brand) of faith – we forget that...maybe...these familiar Christmas scriptures within the Bible aren't meant to serve our self interest. That maybe they are meant to actually tell the story of what happened when God became entered the world to save us.

As my friend suggests, what if – instead of giving way to skepticism – we might begin this last week before Christmas with the outlandish claim that what Luke describes in this passage may have actually happened? That “it may be that roughly 2015 years, 9 months, and 7 days ago a messenger of God who had a name, Gabriel, appeared in a vision to a peasant girl who also had a name, Mary, and told her something very much like what the gospel writers say: that, though she was young, and not wealthy or powerful, and not yet married to her husband to be, that she was chosen of God to be the *theotokos* (the God-bearer) into the world of human history and time.”¹

¹ This friend's name is the Rev. Dan Lewis – and I owe him all the credit for provoking this sermon. Typically, I would preach on Mary's willingness to say “yes” and connected it to our need to follow her example. Dan's paper on this text (The Well, 2011, Austin) led me down a different, interesting path.

There was a time – long ago, when the church began – with small pockets of believers who would gather in homes – when the church was entrusted with a story about the way that God acted in history.

Back then, the central act of the church was to remember that history. To gather together in community and in worship to tell the story, and then to tell it again and again...to each other, to children, to those outside the community...because in the telling of those stories there was good news about the way that God saved us by entering the world in Christ.

The Church's earliest creeds evidence this kind of practice. Think about what we say when we stand up, like we did at Mary Ellen's baptism this morning, and recited the oldest of our creeds: the Apostle's Creed. What we do is re-tell history – the history of God's people.

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose again from the dead...

Now, later – after the church grew, in number and in importance...after the church spread to different parts of the world and incorporated many different worldviews and cultures...after the church transitioned from a movement to religion...later, the church began to develop and organize these stories about Jesus into systems of belief; what we call Church doctrines.

And, over time, it was these doctrines that became the primary way to define the boundaries of who belonged to a particular community of faith, and who did not.

Don't misunderstand: doctrines are important. There is great wisdom and understanding to be found within the doctrines of the church. Doctrines help us preserve the truth of God's salvation history.

But, more and more, I believe that in our current, competitive, anxious, and fractious, religious landscape, we put too much weight on doctrine. We put too much emphasis on orthodoxy – or, “right belief.” More and more, as we spend our energy trying to say what we believe in exactly the right way, I think we subordinate the truth of God's saving act in Jesus Christ to the

script of how our particular brand of Christianity dictates we must believe – and live.

And the danger in over-valuing our preferences for how to believe the *right way* about the Christian faith is that our quest for purity can blind us to the more simple, profound truth that is found in the story itself – that the God we worship is a God who is active in world.

That the God we worship was, is, and will be active in engaging this world we live in, and engaging each of us, not through well-articulated and rational systems of belief, but through the folds of history.

That is what I think is so powerful about this story about Mary and Gabriel. That as we hear it, we see that God gets involved with us through real people, like Mary. In a real time, like when Quirinius was governor of Syria. In a real place, like Bethlehem of Judea.

And while it is true that there is only one Mary – only one *theotokos*. And that – only one time – did the Word become flesh in Jesus the Christ. It is also true that ever since God created this world, and the fullness thereof...ever since God breathed life into the dust that became human beings like you and me...it is true that ever since that time, God mixes it up and gets involved in the real stuff of life. Not through academic exercises of the mind, or by doctrinal debate...but through actual events and people and opportunities. That is the God we worship and serve. A God who is “an active saver.” As my friend would say, “a meddler” in our lives...because, quite simply, God loves us and wants to save us.

So rather than our faith being about how right we are about the things we are supposed to believe...what if, instead, we might take our lead from this scripture – this story, about the time that Mary had her life changed by a messenger from God – and find the encouragement to see the life of our faith as an exercise in paying attention.

Then we might discover that the faith into which we have been called – that the *salvation history* into which we have been grafted – is less about whether we “get it” and “understand it” and are “right about it”...and more about how to wait and watch for God to act again, in this world, in our lives, in this time...

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