

“The Message of Angels: Peace for the Perplexed”

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

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Luke 1:26-38

Today I continue my sermon series on angel visits prior to and just after the birth of Jesus by looking at the visit of the angel Gabriel to a young girl named Mary, found in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Just six months before, the same angel had paid a call on Zechariah, the aging husband of Mary’s relative Elizabeth, to pass on the news that he and his wife were going to have a child named John. Now Gabriel shows up again to tell Mary, this young, poor, female, which would have been three strikes against her in the first century culture in which she lived, that she is going to miraculously conceive and give birth to the Messiah. Given that Mary was going to be found pregnant without having first been married, she would soon have a fourth strike against her. Now listen for the back and forth between Gabriel and Mary. Note how she moves from being perplexed to having a sense of peace. *Read Luke here.*

Of all the many renderings of the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary in the history of art, my very favorite was painted by Henry Ossawa Tanner, the great African-American artist, in 1898. Tanner, the son of an African Methodist Episcopal bishop, devoted quite a few of his paintings to depicting Biblical stories. Tanner said of his religious art, “My effort has been not only to put the Biblical incident in the original setting, but at the same time to give the human touch which ‘makes the whole world kin’ and which ever remains the same.”¹

The Mary in Tanner’s painting is a young Jewish peasant, sitting on the edge of her bed, wearing a beige robe with brown stripes. A contemporary of Tanner’s described her garb as “the common striped cotton of the poorer class, a costume they have kept to the present day.”² Mary has no halo. She does not appear celestial or divinely beautiful. She is just a rather plain girl, her face reflecting a mixture of confusion and contemplation. She is clearly “much perplexed” by what is happening.

Tanner portrays Mary listening intently to Gabriel, but he is not shown with wings, nor does he have a halo of his own. In fact, you can’t make out any of the angel’s features, just a beam of golden light bathing Mary’s stone bedroom in its glow. For me, this has the effect of taking the emphasis away from the person of the angel and placing it on the power and provocative nature of the angel’s message.

What most interests me about the angels, the messengers, that God sends into our lives (whether they be supernatural, or as human as you and me - and I believe they can be either), is not so much what they *look* like, but what they *say*. In the case of angels, it is not so much the *medium* but the *message* that matters.

In the story of Mary’s encounter with Gabriel, the message comes in three parts. The first thing the angels says to her, his opening salutation, is, “Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you.” It strikes me that this greeting gets to the very core of the gospel message, not just for the young Jewish peasant girl

Mary, but also for you and me and the world around us. You are loved. You are chosen. God is and will be with you in the warp and woof of life.

This is the message we proclaim at every baptism. Whether it be for a tiny infant in his or her mother's arms or for young children standing there at the font, shifting their feet somewhat apprehensively as we go through the liturgy; whether it be for an eighth grader just now receiving the sacrament while his confirmation peers reaffirm for themselves the vows that were made at their baptism, or for an adult coming to Christian faith for the first time, the message of baptism is the same. And hopefully, we recall its meaning for ourselves each time we witness another one. You, baptized one, are precious in God's sight. You are God's child: claimed, called, and chosen. Not because of any effort on your part, but simply because God has picked you to hear and bear the good news. It is grace.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Life of the Beloved* (which the Tuesday Morning Men's Bible Study class is in the process of reading), talks about the important of claiming this grace for ourselves, acknowledging that, like the bread of communion, we are taken and blessed.

*"We are the Beloved", Nouwen writes. "We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, "You are my Beloved."*³

*But, "As long as 'being the Beloved' is little more than a beautiful thought or lofty idea that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes. What is required is to become the Beloved in the commonplaces of my daily existence and, bit by bit, to close the gap that exists between what I know myself to be and the countless specific realities of everyday life."*⁴

What Nouwen is getting at, I think, is claiming and recognizing that God is with us not just in the extraordinary and wonderful events of life, but also in the midst of the ordinary; not just on the mountaintops, but also in the valleys; not just in the triumphs, but also in the tragedies.

As Dan and I say whenever we have an opportunity (sometimes I think we say it *ad infinitum*), our church's very name, "Immanuel", means "God-with-us". I can't think of a better name for a congregation or a better self-understanding for a person seeking to live a spiritual life. "God is with you," our presence with friends in a courtroom or by a casket whispers. "Although you may not feel like it, you are Beloved." "God is with you," our support of a troubled teen or the listening ear we lend to an anxious or devastated friend echoes. "You are precious in God's eyes." "God is with you," says the meal we send to a hungry neighbor or a hurting friend. "God is with you," the visits we make to the hospital or the tags we take from the tree communicate. "God is with you" declares the teaching we do with our children and youth, the money we give as a church and as individuals to helping organizations, the comfort and challenge we give to those with whom we are in community.

Mary's first reaction to the angel's message that she was favored and that God was with her was to be "much perplexed" and "to ponder what sort of greeting this might be." The word the NRSV

translates as “perplexed” is the Greek word *diatassaro* which means to be thoroughly confused or agitated. I can think of a host of reasons Mary might have had this response, among them the following:

Perhaps Mary thought to herself, “I’m not sure you know just whom you are talking to here, Gabriel. I am poor, I am female, I am young. I have no power, privilege, or prestige. How can you say that I am favored, or that God is with me?” But if she thought on the stories in her Hebrew Bible, she wouldn’t have been so surprised. God was always using the unlikely one. Abraham and Sarah, the elderly parents; Jacob the trickster; Moses, the fugitive from justice who grew up in the courts of the Egyptians and had difficulty speaking; David, the eighth son; Jeremiah, the prophet, who told God, “Who am I that you want to use me? I am only a youth.”

Maybe, despite the portrait we have of her as unflinchingly faithful, Mary had just recently endured some pain, loss, or tragedy in her life that caused her to question not only God’s goodness, but even God’s very existence. If that is so, to hear that God was with her certainly would have caused her some agitation. Then again it could be that Mary was familiar enough with the Hebrew scripture and how God’s messengers work that she might have seen the next step coming.

A greeting that God was with her, that she was favored and chosen, would mean that something would be expected of her. Way back in Genesis, when Abraham was blessed, it was with the expectation that he would be a blessing to all the families of the Earth. By the way, this is how the Reformed Tradition regards the notion of being elect, or chosen. To understand that you have been chosen by God is a call to service, not a call to special privilege. So the next time I come up to you, or somebody from the Fellowship Committee, the International Mission Committee, the Worship Committee, or any other committee for that matter comes up to you and says, “*Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you,*” remember that. Watch out!

In response to Mary’s perplexity, Gabriel lays out the next piece of the message. “Don’t be afraid. 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 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.”

In the centuries since, we have understood Gabriel’s message to be, in essence: “Fear not, Mary, you are going to bear God into the world through your body.” The Eastern Orthodox Church calls Mary the Theotokos, the God-bearer. And while her being chosen for that task certainly makes her special (after all, no one else has had the opportunity to literally bear Jesus in her womb), it seems to me that each one of us can nonetheless play the role of a Theotokos. We do this by bringing compassion and mercy, understanding and grace to bear in the various places in which we find ourselves. We bear God into the world in the forgiveness we extend to those who hurt us and in the way we ask for forgiveness from those we hurt. We bear God into the world in the way we are present to those who are suffering or in pain and the way we contribute to the good of humanity as we carry out our jobs.

Tuesday night we had our third monthly Theology on Tap night for young adults, ages 21-35, at the Temple Lounge in Arlington. (So, it is just possible you might not be the right age for it!) There were

only a few of us there - we're just starting to get the group off the ground. We chatted for a good while before we turned to the topic for discussion that night, which was, "How do we nurture our souls in this Holiday season?" The young adults talked about how much getting together with family and friends feeds their souls, and then I said, "And being in worship, too, right?" And then I suggested that serving others in this season is a good way to feed our souls as well.

The next day I received an email from one of the young adults who, I have to say, was a Theotokos for me. It went like this.

I was thinking about your question from last night and a way in which our agreed-upon response has a small loophole that's worth discussing. I thought of it because this morning, I attended the funeral of a coworker's three-week-old child (the baby passed away on Thanksgiving Day). I was thinking about your question while I was sitting there, about how holidays aren't just nurturing for the soul because of how much they remind you of all you have to be thankful for, but potentially wrenching for the soul as well because they serve as a time of nostalgia and heartbreak for people who are dealing with tragedies, be it the loss of someone close or the difficulty of understanding a situation in which friends/family are suffering gravely.

For those who are fortunate enough not to be directly suffering or missing somebody during this time, the holidays are extremely important because they make you realize how fortunate and blessed you are, and this in turn is an amazing and blessed way of feeding your soul and the souls of others. But for those who are not as lucky, the holidays are much more difficult and can cause much pain on the soul, because they make you remember those who you love and miss dearly, and old wounds are easily reopened as you look back on happier times. I suppose the best way to make amends for this tension is to be aware of it, and thank God every day for the many blessings He bestows, while trying to do whatever you can to help those who are in need. What do you think?⁵

I read that and I thought, "Here is a Theotokos!" In my response to her, I didn't use the word Theotokos, but that's what she was. She was bearing God into the world by calling all of us to reach out in compassion and grace to those who are hurting during this season of the year.

Mary's response to Gabriel's declaration that she is going to bear God into the world is, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" It is a reasonable question, a practical question that Mary asks. She's never been with a man, how can she have a baby? And I think she asks it in all earnestness. But read in a certain way, it makes me think of how each of us responds to the challenge to be a Theotokos, a bearer of God into the world.

There are so many different ways we can say "How can this be?" There are so many different excuses we can give. "How can this be that God can use me to bear love and peace into the world? I am too young. I am too old, way past retirement age. I am too busy. I've made too many terrible mistakes. I am too tired. I am in too much pain for God to use me in the world."

A little later in this service we are going to hear a Minute for Mission from Shin Fujiyama. Shin will be telling us about his work with Students Helping Honduras, the non-profit outreach he founded after he went to Honduras as a college student. While he was there, Shin found his heart moved by the plight of orphans there and felt the need to do something. Shin could have said, “How can this be that God can use me? I am a college student.” But instead, Shin opened himself to being used by God and now the work there has truly taken off.

After Mary replies, “How can this be?” Gabriel responds by saying, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and overshadow you. With God, nothing is impossible.” And then Mary says, “Here am I. Let it be to me according to Your word.”

As I thought about Mary’s affirmation this week, I was reminded of a moving scene in *Across the Universe*⁶, the movie musical featuring Beatles’ songs. The scene starts with two girls ascending some steps to a house as two soldiers in full dress uniform are descending them. It is clear that the soldiers have just told the mother of another soldier that he has died in Vietnam, and the girls, one of whom is the soldier’s girlfriend, then rush up to hug her. In the next frame, you are transported to the streets of inner city Detroit during the 1967 Riot. There is gunfire everywhere, coming from both the National Guard and the people in the streets. There are explosions as Molotov cocktails are thrown. And in the midst of the chaos, a young African-American boy is sitting next to a hollowed out car, singing these words:

*When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me,
Speaking words of wisdom, Let it Be.
And in my hour of darkness, she is standing right in front of me,
Speaking words of wisdom, Let it Be.*

Then you see a funeral procession heading through a cemetery to the soldier’s graveside service, and then it cuts to an African-American church, and you see the black boy from the riots in the casket. Now the whole black gospel choir joins the song.

*And when the broken-hearted people, living in the world agree,
There will be an answer, Let it Be.
For though they may be parted, there is still a chance that they will see,
There will be an answer, Let It Be.*

*And when the night is cloudy, there is still a light that shines on me,
Shine until tomorrow, Let it Be.
I wake up to the sound of music, Mother Mary comes to me,
Speaking words of wisdom, Let it Be.⁷*

I’ve always heard that song as sort of a resignation to the way things are. You know, *Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be*. But today I’m wondering: What if we begin to see it, in the midst of the disasters and pain in the world and the problems in our personal lives, as the sort of affirmation Mary made in response to Gabriel? Not a resignation to the way the world is, but a declaration that we are willing to be

used by God, no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves. What if we saw it as an affirmation that you and I, too are each called to be Theotokos, God-bearers?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Henry O. Tanner, "Effort," statement published in "Exhibition of Religious Paintings by H.O. Tanner," checklist of an exhibition at Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1924, n.p. as quoted in Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 106-107.

² Helen Cole, "Henry O. Tanner, Painter," *Brush and Pencil*, v. 6, n. 3, (June 1900), 101-102.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, rev. ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p. 35-36.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 45-46.

⁵ From a private email communication with a member of the group.

⁶ *Across the Universe* was written by Dick Clement, Iain LaFrenais, and Julie Taymor and directed by Julie Taymor. It came out in 2007. The soloists on "Let It Be" were Timothy T. Mitchum and Carol Woods.

⁷ "Let it Be" is credited to both John Lennon and Paul McCartney. It was published in March of 1970 and is the title track of their album of the same name.