

The Road to Bethlehem: What Is Being Born in Us?

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Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Luke 1:26-38

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, we continue our journey toward Bethlehem by hearing the story of the Annunciation, the tale Luke's Gospel tells of the visit of an angel named Gabriel to a young virgin named Mary. This is an encounter in which the angel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and that she will bear a son named Jesus, who will be called the son of the Most High.

If you had the privilege of being at the 9:00 service, you saw a number of Immanuel's children participate in a pageant which started with Mary and Joseph reacting to the news that Jesus was to be born. Then the animals in the stable sang of the nativity from their vantage point (we had a donkey, some sheep, and at least one goat). The shepherds and the wise men were there, they too came to behold him. It was a wonderful pageant, with some original songs written by our own Lee Larsen.

My very favorite of the songs is called, "Who Me?" In the song, Mary and Joseph react to the news delivered to them by Gabriel that they are going to have special roles to play in the birth of the Messiah by saying, essentially, "Who me? Are you entirely sure you've got the right person here? Do you really mean that I have an important part to play in God coming into the world? Who me?" Gabriel responds by singing, "Do not be afraid." And then, "Yes, yes, you."

As we closed the 9 o'clock service, the children stood up front with me. I asked them what Gabriel said to Mary and Joseph. And they said, "Do not be afraid." And I asked, "And what else?" And they said, "Yes, you." We closed the service by repeating in call and response fashion, "Who me?" and, "Yes, you."

When you hear the words of this text remember that it is not just Mary and Joseph and some cute children who are the ones to whom God says, "Yes, you." It is all of us. All of us can bear the Love of God into the world.

As you hear again the familiar story of Gabriel's visit to Mary, try to listen to it as if for the first time. Get into the narrative. Put yourself in her shoes. A very young woman - engaged but not yet married, hearing that she would have a child - even though she was a virgin. Think about how you might respond to an encounter with someone who told you that God was going to do something remarkable, something that seemed impossible or at least not totally rational, in and through **you**. Think about what new thing God might be trying to birth in you, in me, in us. And ponder how you might, with Mary, respond by saying, "Here am I, God's servant, let it be with me according to your word."

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 forever, 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.

“Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you. The Spirit of God will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and you will bear God’s holy presence into the world.” I think most of us, at least at first glance, tend to regard that message as one that was specific to a particular young woman in a particular village in Galilee some two millennia ago. But this morning I want to suggest that it might not be a bad daily affirmation, something that you put on your bathroom mirror, or hang up on your refrigerator, or repeat to yourself on a regular basis through the day, in the manner of the daily affirmations that Al Franken’s *Saturday Night Live* character, Stuart Smalley, would repeat to himself. His classic line was, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.” What if instead of that (and that’s not a bad affirmation), we said to ourselves each morning, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you. You will bear God’s presence into the world today.”

The biggest question that Gabriel’s encounter raises for me is not so much, “Who, me?” As it is, “How will this happen? What exactly might that look like? What is it that God is bringing to birth in me and you?”

It is that last question (“What is it that God might be bringing to birth in me, in you, in us?”) and the corresponding question, “What role do we have to play in that happening?” that has been occupying my attention this Advent. What is being born - not just in Mary, but in you, in me, in us? And how do we respond to it?

That question was with me when I went to visit Chesterbrook Residences earlier this week to lead our monthly worship service. It was a nice turn out. There were nine or ten Chesterbrook residents in attendance, including Barbara Donnelly. And some other Immanuelites were there, too. Our own Irena Lum plays the piano for those services. She was there, not too far removed from a hospital stay, but she seemed as strong as ever. We sang Christmas carols, we prayed, I read some scripture and gave a meditation on gifts, and then we shared celebrations and concerns. Irena had the first celebration. She shared her joy at being able to be with us that afternoon, and told us how she saw playing the piano for those services as something the Lord called her to do. In that moment I was reminded of something I once read, written by another octogenarian. “How do you know when your mission on Earth is over? How do you know your work here is through?” The answer she gave was this, “If you’re still breathing, it isn’t. God still has something for you to do.”

That reminded me of Marge Silvis, in her last few months at Greenspring. She was not able to do much of what she used to be able to do. But she saw her mission in her final days as that of prayer, praying for people beyond herself.

God isn’t finished with any one of us yet, young old, or in between. So what is being born in you? I thought of that question earlier this week as I reflected on the thirteen people who are becoming new members of Immanuel today. Each of them felt drawn to this congregation somehow. Something about Immanuel, the opportunities to serve here, the experience of worship, music and preaching here, the sense of welcome and community here, it drew them. Each of them

has gifts to bring us. And we have gifts to bring them. How will their involvement here help them to sense and participate in God's presence? How will they bring God's presence to bear among us? We will see that play out in the months and years ahead. Each fresh commitment we make to living out our response to God in a community can be just the beginning of something new.

What is being born in you? In me? In us? That question was with me at the Session meeting the other night as we heard a report from the Strategic Planning Committee. It's a clunky name. It sounds a little too corporate, a little too business like. We'd probably have been better off to call it the Discernment Committee. But it is a committee that has been trying to discern what new things we might do in the future. The committee has been working, planning and praying to discern God's will for the future direction of this congregation.

Some of that work has been behind the scenes, as they and I have examined with me what some other churches have done, as we've heard from public relations consultant, as we've thought through possibilities. Some of it has been more public, including a survey that was mailed to the congregation late last summer and into the fall, and a couple of forums in the fall, to get your feedback on what you like, don't like, and what you might want to see changed.

One of things the survey made clear, at least among those who responded to it, is that there is generally a high degree of satisfaction with how things are going here. Not 100 percent, but a high degree of satisfaction. But the other thing that is clear - survey or not - and it is true of churches like ours around the area and throughout the country - is that attendance in Sunday worship and involvement in the ministry and mission of congregations is declining. So that presents us with a challenge. How can we better tell the story of Immanuel? What can we do to meet the needs of people who are not coming through our doors? How can we participate in birthing something new here?

I have never given birth to a baby. My being a man impedes that. But I've been present at the birth of both of my daughters and I have watched my wife go through two pregnancies and deliveries, and I can tell you from that experience that giving birth is not always comfortable. I think Bill Cosby said it best when he shared that his wife told him, trying to explain the pain of childbirth, "Bill, take your lip. Now pull it over the top of your head. And then you will know what it is like to give birth."

At a series of forums in January, the Strategic Planning Committee will lay some proposals on the table for us to consider, to react to, to reflect upon. We can't move forward without your buy-in. It makes no sense to move forward without your buy-in. One of the proposals involves starting an alternative service on Saturday or Sunday evening to reach people who can't or don't choose to come to worship on Sunday morning. Another proposal is to consider restructuring the Sunday morning schedule. If we add an additional service in the evening, what are we going to do with Sunday morning? Keep it the same, change it a little bit, we don't know. These are not "done deals". But we are going to need your participation as a congregation as we ponder what might be born here. I know this - it probably will not be entirely comfortable. Birth never is.

I thought of what is being born in us, in you and me, when I read reflections on the death of Christopher Hitchens. As you may know, Hitchens was one of the new atheists, a gadfly, a provocative, incisive, abrasive commentator, who took on religion every chance he could. You might be familiar with his book, *God Is Not Great*.

I found Hitchens an irritant, but at the same time a great foil for conversations about how we live our faith and how we respond to people who are cynical. Now that he is gone, a number of his friends and acquaintances are sharing memories of their relationship with him. One of those friends is the evangelical leader Larry Taunton. In his tribute to him, he wrote this about a debate they took part in up in Billings, Montana.

“Hitch had once told me that Montana was the only state he had never been in. I decided to complete his tour of the contiguous United States and arranged for the two of us to meet there. Before the debate, a local television station sent a camera crew over to interview us.

When he was asked what he thought of me, a Christian, and an evangelical at that, Hitch replied: “If everyone in the United States had the same qualities of loyalty and care and concern for others that Larry Taunton had, we’d be living in a much better society than we do.”

I was moved. Stunned, really. As we left, I told him that I really appreciated the gracious remark.

“I meant it and have been waiting for an opportunity to say it.”¹

Something was being born in the lives of Christopher Hitchens and Larry Taunton. It was an understanding of and appreciation for each other - and for each other’s humanity. Even if they didn’t agree with each other all the time, and they certainly didn’t, what was evident in Taunton’s words was a respect and appreciation for Hitchens - more than that, a love, for a man whose beliefs he didn’t share. And Hitchens, in turn, even though he disdained religion, clearly showed he had a great respect for the way Larry Taunton was trying to live it out in his life.

Having something be born in me, in you, in us, requires a receptivity. You can’t be halfway pregnant, of course. But having God bring something to birth in you requires receptivity, the sort of receptivity Mary possessed when she said, “Here I am, let it be with me according to your word.”

Did you read the Washington Post magazine last weekend? I usually pick it up to do the crossword, and I totally missed this article. It was an article about some Presbyterians. Presbyterians made the Washington Post magazine!

Jon and Nina Clark are members of Neelsville Presbyterian Church over in Germantown, Maryland. They had three boys; I think they were maybe 10, 8 and 6, when Nina got pregnant for the fourth time. She was thirty-four, so just under the age when they routinely do an amniocentesis to test for Down syndrome, and when their baby girl was born, they discovered that she had Down Syndrome. It seemed at the time like the worst thing that could possibly happen. But they brought little Emma home, they and their boys loved on her, and then something strange happened. They started to feel like God might be calling them to something more. They started to feel like something was being born in them. They sensed a calling to adopt another Down syndrome child, this one from overseas, where Down syndrome children don’t get the sort of care and attention they do here. So they found Abby in China, and brought her home. But that wasn’t enough. They thought, “There is room for another Down Syndrome child in our hearts and in our family.” So they went to Russia (it cost them 36,000 dollars to adopt Elizabeth) - and they brought her home.

What is being born in you? In me? In us? And how might we say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

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¹ <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/16/my-take-an-evangelical-remembers-his-friend-hitchens/>