

“The Mystery Made Known”

Scripture: II Samuel 7:1-16 Luke 1:26-38
Rev. Lewis Galloway



It is not every day that we speak with angels. I suspect that we are more ready to hear the blare of horns, the angry shouts of a crowd, or the endless cycle of news from the television than to hear the voice of God. Would we even recognize the voice of an angel? Would we simply mistake it for a peel of thunder, an animal cry, the inner voice narrating a daydream, or the dissonant sounds in a shopping mall? We are Artful Dodgers of God's word.

We can imagine that the young girl Mary lived a quiet, peaceful, and domestic life with her family in Nazareth. We can see her going about ordinary household chores: drawing water from the well, weaving cloth, making bread, and tending animals. We can see her contemplating her future life with Joseph to whom she is engaged.

Suddenly her quiet thoughts and the peace of her day are disturbed by an angel and her life is turned upside down. The maker of the universe is not silent. God speaks through the words of scripture, the counsel of a friend, children singing the songs of faith, the waters of baptism, the rhythms of nature, the startling words of a stranger. What would we hear, if we spent more time listening in prayer than speaking in prayer? The Quakers, or the Society of Friends, are on to something in their silent meetings. Do you remember how the prophet Elijah fled into the wilderness after defeating the prophets of Baal? He was running scared because Queen Jezebel had threatened his life. He was exhausted and needed a word from God more than anything else. God spoke to Elijah. God did not speak through a grand display of rushing wind, shattering earthquake or flaming fire, but through “the sound of thin silence.” Did you hear that? The sound of thin silence. It takes special ears to hear that.

What happens when God speaks to us? When God speaks to us, our ordinary lives are disrupted and our pathways changed. When we hear God speak, we know that God is more than a word, faith more than an attitude, and Jesus more than a heroic figure from the past.

When Gabriel says to Mary, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” she is not sure what sort of greeting this might be. Gabriel's words change a quiet afternoon into a moment's communion with eternity and a stone house into a holy sanctuary. When God speaks, the foundation is shaken. Gabriel reassures a startled and frightened Mary. He tells her that she will be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, who will reign over the house of David forever. He speaks these words in fulfillment of the words spoken generations before through the prophet Nathan to King David. David had big plans to build a house for God. After all, David had moved from a field tent to a fancy house built of cedar. Surely, he could do something at least as nice for God. God had other plans. God spoke through the prophet Nathan, “You won't build me a house, David; I will build you a house.” God would build a Davidic dynasty. God told David that David's son would rule over his kingdom forever. So, it comes down to a young girl in a remote town in Galilee.

Mary will give birth to the royal son of David. Mary questions how this is possible. Gabriel declares that with God all things are possible. Mary's life that once seemed so predictable is certain no longer. What seemed impossible suddenly becomes a fresh possibility. The path ahead will not be easy. As a result of listening to the divine voice, Mary faces potential

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scorn, ridicule, rejection and even death.

William Butler Yeats's poem, *Mother of God*, captures some sense of the terrifying and mysterious path before Mary:

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,
This Fallen star my milk sustains,
This love that makes my heart's blood stop
Or strikes a sudden chill in my bones
And bids my hair stand up?

Have you ever had a sudden chill or heard a word that made your hair stand up?

A friend told me about an experience he had in worship some years ago. He was listening to the minister preaching the sermon. He told me that he could not remember the text, the subject of the sermon, or even the words the preacher spoke. What he did remember was that through the sermon he heard the one word, “forgive,” spoken over and over again to him like a wave pushing and pulling and tugging at him. He was not even sure if the preacher even said the word forgive at any point in the sermon. His hair may not have literally stood up, but he knew deep down in his bones that God was calling him to forgive a wrong that he had endured and held as a grudge in his heart.

This baby born to Mary will be known as the Son of God and the Son of his ancestor David. In him, heaven and earth will meet. The divine and the human will be united. Through him, God will reconcile all things. The path to everlasting peace is not easy. Mary will witness how the mystery of God's reconciling love will be made known in her son. She will endure a rough road to Bethlehem where her baby will be born among the animals far from family at home. She will watch her son grow in wisdom and strength and ponder his destiny. She will hear the neighbors gossip about how he is out of his mind; she will see the religious leaders reject him and plot to kill him. She will be there when he is tried, beaten, and crucified. She will wish, as any parent would, to take his place, bear his pain upon herself, and do the dying for him. This she cannot do. Instead, Mary will know the pain of watching helplessly as her beloved son suffers on the cross.

Through this child the earth and all its people will find peace. Of course, it is not just any kind of peace, but the peace that passes understanding. It is the peace of God which comes through the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. I have learned that in every act of forgiveness there is a kind of dying. The cross teaches us that Jesus takes our sin upon himself and does the dying for us.

In the same way, whenever we forgive there is a part of us that dies as we bear the pain of the hurt upon ourselves. I was at a church conference some years ago and I met a woman who seemed full of life. I watched her interact with others. She was a Christian educator. She was the kind of person who exuded natural warmth and seemed to show a genuine interest in every person she met. In a moment alone, I asked her how she got to be the person she was – seemingly so kind, caring, and joyful. I know it was a bit awkward and presumptuous of me to be so intrusive. She looked at me and said, “I wasn't always like this.” She told me that her

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husband had deserted her some years before. She became angry and bitter and was stuck in her misery. One day, something pushed her to call him on the phone. The prodding of an angel, maybe. She hadn't spoken to him in several years. "Jim," she said, "This is Trina." Silence answered the greeting. She continued, "It may not make any difference to you, but it makes a difference to me. I forgive you." Even though there was no answer, she said that she felt the pain, grief, and misery lift from her shoulders. She was free of that terrible weight at last.

I do not believe that we can grasp the mystery of the incarnation if we are consumed with getting our way at any cost, spending all our time acquiring things, seeking revenge for a wrong done to us, or taking away the rights or freedom of others. No, the way to enter into the mystery made known in Jesus is through listening to the voice of God, sharing what we have with others, reaching out to those in need, and taking on the hard work of reconciliation.

Sometimes we get the idea that the Christian faith is about little more than smoothing out the rough places of our lives and making things a little bit easier. Some people think that the Christian faith is something we add to life to give it more zest like we might add seasoning to soup. The Christian faith is not something we add to life; it is the foundation of life. The Christian faith is not about following a set of rules, but living in a relationship with Jesus and his followers. It is about living in the power of the Holy Spirit when all other power is drained out of us. The Christian life is not about escaping the rough places and the difficult times. It is about facing these places and times with a desire to see Jesus arise in these challenging places and hard times. There is a peace that comes only through the hard work of forgiveness, justice, and love.

In the winter of 1993, I took the 8th grade Confirmation Class of Shandon Church to Atlanta for an urban mission plunge. We had great plans for the weekend. We were going to see a bit of Atlanta, help staff the homeless night shelter for 50 men at Central Presbyterian Church, and then serve Sunday breakfast to the homeless at the neighboring Catholic Church. As we were preparing to leave, some of the parents said that a big snow was predicted for Atlanta that weekend. I thought to myself, "What harm is a little bit of snow." The first night, what began as rain became a blizzard. Everything shut down in Atlanta. You couldn't see more than a block ahead. No one could get to the church except the homeless men, a few police and our intrepid 8th graders. The youth kept the shelter and fed the men whatever food we could find. Some of the kids stayed up all night playing cards or chess and talking with the men. If you closed your eyes, you could see Jesus among those youth speaking through them a word of comfort, warmth, and peace to all that night. It is not every day that we hear the angels speak. It takes special ears to hear that.

Like Mary, we will spend our whole lives discovering, pondering, and understanding the mystery made known in Jesus.

Take a moment. Jesus is all around us and within us.

Take a moment. Listen for what God is saying to you now.

When the mystery of his presence takes hold of you, finish the sermon in your own heart.