

AN ANGEL'S VOICE

LUKE 1: 25-38

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University Church of Chicago

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When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he was only thirty years old, but he was confident of his abilities. So, when a committee sat to examine the wording of Jefferson's draft of the Declaration, the proud young author was somewhat discomfited by their editorial revisions. I have been there; I know how it feels to have an editor or a committee go after your work.

Benjamin Franklin noticed his colleague's distress and told him a little story. When he was a young man, Franklin said, he had a friend who had completed his apprenticeship as a hatter and was about to open up in business for himself. He was eager to have a fine signboard and composed one with the inscription, "John Thompson, hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money" over the depiction of a hat.

He then showed it to his friends and asked them what they thought. The first one remarked that "hatter" was superfluous, as "makes and sells hats" showed the nature of his business. The second friend pointed out that "maker" could be left off the sign, as customers were unlikely to be interested in who made the hats. The third friend said that as it was not the custom locally to sell on credit, the words "for ready money" were superfluous. They, too, were struck out, leaving just "John Thompson sells hats."

"No one would expect you to give them away," said a fourth friend, "so what is the point of 'sells'?" Finally someone said that it seemed unnecessary to have the word "hats" on the board since there was the painted picture of a hat underneath the name.

Jefferson was much mollified by this story, and it was generally agreed that the committee's editorial work had approved the wording of the Declaration of Independence.

In many ways, the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary of the coming miraculous birth of Jesus reads like Benjamin Franklin's little folktale. It has been pared down to its essentials and it echoes the work of many who have gone before: the announcement of the wondrous birth of Ishmael in Genesis 16; or Isaac in Genesis 17; Samson in Judges 13; and most obviously John the Baptist in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, preceding this announcement.

Luke places the birth of Jesus in the context of a series of interventions by God into human history by way of wondrous births and in the context of God's promises to Israel. The biblical stories in which a special birth is announced follow a consistent pattern: the appearance of a divine figure; fear or

confusion in the one to whom the figure appears; the announcement of the message; an objection by the one receiving the message; and finally a concluding promise or blessing from the divine figure.

This structure does more than provide a framework. It points to the very human aspect of the story. Who among us would not be surprised by the appearance of an angel telling us about a miraculous event yet to come? Who among us would not protest that the angel had come to the wrong address? I confess that I am much like Chesterton when he said, "If I were to witness a miracle, I would say, 'Could you do that over again so that I could gather some data?'"

Gabriel is a key figure in Christian tradition—thanks largely to Charles Wesley's hymns—but the truth is that his biblical appearances are limited to the two birth announcements in Luke's Gospel—first about John the Baptist and this one concerning Jesus, and an appearance in Daniel in which he announces the details of the coming wrath (Dan. 8:15-27).

Gabriel's opening greeting signals the special character of both Mary and the coming announcement. Mary is "favored" and "the Lord is with [her]." Mary is, of course, perplexed. "Do not be afraid, Mary," the angel declares, "for you have found favor with God."

Any urban pastor encounters some unusual people and gets some startling requests. Several years ago I got the most bizarre wedding request I have encountered in a long time. A woman called and asked my secretary if I would officiate at her wedding a couple of months later in a hotel ballroom. The wedding, the bride-to-be explained, was going to be a surprise—for the groom! The plan was for him to arrive at the hotel thinking that he was going to a party, but upon entering the ballroom, everyone would shout, "Surprise! You're getting married!"

My secretary explained that I spend a great deal of time in pre-marital counseling with couples before the wedding takes place. That did not deter the determined bride-to-be. "Oh," she said, "we'll come for counseling, but he won't know that I'm serious about really getting married." What about the license? Plans? Little items like those? No, my secretary said, "I am sure Dr. Winkler will not officiate at your wedding."

Marriage is one of the most important commitments anyone can make. It is full of surprises, to be sure, but there is also an element of trust involved. That's what undergirds this story of Gabriel and Mary. She's surprised. But she also trusts the message.

Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* records the discussions held among campesinos, farmers and fisherfolk who lived in the country around Lake Nicaragua. In this text they hear Gabriel's greeting of favor extending not only to Mary but also to them, for according to this angel, this savior, this liberator is going to be born among them, the people who were poor. 'It not the rich but the poor who need liberation,' says one. "The rich and the poor will be liberated," says another. "Us poor people are going to be liberated from the rich. The rich are going to be liberated from themselves, that is, from their wealth. Because they are more slaves than we are."

Thanks to Bernard Madoff, a number of rich people have been liberated from their slavery to money. But, as Paul Krugman pointed out in last Friday's *New York Times*, the difference between Mr. Madoff and a lot of rich people on Wall Street was simply that he skipped a few steps, simply stealing his clients' money rather than collecting big fees while exposing investors to risks they didn't understand. Bush administration officials like Christopher Cox, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, looked the other way as evidence of financial fraud mounted. He's as guilty in his own fashion as Bernard Madoff.

You and I are faced at this Christmas as we always are with a dilemma: Dare we proclaim God's gospel of justice and peace knowing that it is designed to turn the world upside down?

Each of us has her favorite Christmas carol. Likewise, each of us has his favorite Christmas story, many of whose heroes, not surprisingly, are children, like Tiny Tim or Amahl. My favorite Christmas story—as you would expect—was told by Soren Kierkegaard. It is the story of the king and the maid. Kierkegaard, you see, was really a Southerner, because he could not make a point without telling a story.

Kierkegaard didn't tell this story as a Christmas story, but that's all right. "The Star Spangled Banner" was originally a drinking song, and Dvorak's "Going Home" was played at twice the tempo it is played at these days. An author is entitled to everything the hearer hears in her/his works.

Once upon a time a king fell in love with a maid. It's an old theme, how love overcomes all barriers of class, race, nationality. But for all its beauty, the king did not see the matter easily resolved. Racking his mind and heart was the question: how to declare his love? Unable to answer the question, he summoned to his palace all the wise people of his kingdom and put the question to them. As one, they responded, "Sire, nothing could be easier. Your majesty has but to appear in all your glory before the humble abode of the maid and instantly she will fall at your feet and be yours."

But it was precisely that thought that so troubled the king. In return for his love, he wanted her, not fears that would lead to her submission. He wanted her glorification, not his. What a dilemma: when to declare your love means the end of your beloved, and when not to declare your love means the end of love. Night after night the king paced the floor of his palace pondering, until at last he saw love's truth: freedom for the beloved demanded equality with the beloved.

So late one night, long after his courtiers and counselors had retired to their chambers, the king stole out of a side door of the palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maid dressed in the garb of a servant.

"He comes to us as one of us." That is the Christmas story. It's touching—and it's maddening. This solution, so satisfactory to the king—and to Kierkegaard—had I been the maid, I am not sure that I would have found it satisfactory at all. I would have wanted to know more about this young man, about his future and mine. Were the two of us going to be stuck forever living in poverty? Why couldn't he tell me at some point how rich he was? I don't mind marrying a king. It certainly beats living in this hovel.

What makes it so maddening is that while we want God to be God, God wants to be human. We want God to be strong, so that we can weak. But God wants to be weak so that we can be strong. We want God to prove herself. But she answers: “Do you want proof or freedom?”

“God is love,” the Bible tells us, and that means the revelation is in the relationship. “God is love” does not clear up all the mysteries; it provides an even greater mystery. “God is love” is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender. We want God to come in visions and powerful images and unusual circumstances, even miracles. But the perfect self-expression of the Holy comes to us in human form.

Late one night the king stole out of the side door of his palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maid, dressed in the clothes of a servant. Why should the maid, why should any of us, open the door? Because we know that it is in self-abandonment—not self-improvement we find our self-fulfillment. We should open the door because we need to be set free from fear, for love. From self, to God. We should open the door because we need to turn from the apparent to the significant.

I have many “favorite” poets—Marilyn says my favorite poet is the one I am currently reading—but among the top ten is a woman named Vassar Miller. She was born with cerebral palsy and lived her life in great pain. A reader of Thomas Merton and a devout Christian who nonetheless did not write typical, sappy, devotional poetry that displays its piety.

One of her poems, “The Wisdom of Insecurity,” speaks to this story of the angel Gabriel confronting Mary:

There's no abiding city, no, not one.
The towers of stone and steel are fairy stories.
God will not play our games nor join our fun,
Does not give tit for tat, parade His glories.
And chance is chance, not providence dressed neat,
Credentials hidden in its wooden leg.
When the earth opens underneath our feet,
It is a waste of brain and breath to beg.
No angel intervenes but shouts that matter
Has been forever mostly full of holes.
So Simon Peter always walked on water,
Not merely when the lake waves licked his soles.
And when at last he saw he would not drown,

The shining knowledge turned him upside down.

Aren't you and I always left to ponder the meaning of mystical, mysterious moments? And is it ever easy to figure out the difference, as Vassar Miller implies, between luck and providence, guidance and grace, the real and the ideal? The thing I love most about Mary in this story is her question: "How can this be?" (1:34) Mary is pictured as the model disciple, the servant of the Lord who responds in faith (1:45) to the divine initiative. However, she too asked questions. Asking questions, you see, is not itself a mark of unbelief. Asking for signs or miracles—well, that is an indication of lack of faith. But Mary, like you and me, has a questioning faith. She doesn't need a sign.