

“Joseph, You’re Not Going to Believe This!”

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Lk.1:26-38

I suspect that you, like me, have enjoyed going to the mailbox these days and getting Christmas cards from family and friends around the country. I always look forward to hearing from old friends from whom too many years and miles now separate us. Will Willimon recently remarked that these Christmas cards don’t have glossy photographs of new expensive cars driving up to opulent mansions overlooking the ocean. No, they typically contain Norman Rockwellian scenes of a horse-drawn sleigh approaching a small cottage next to a frozen pond surrounded by evergreen trees with smoke coming out of the chimney.¹

Our image of the perfect Christmas is a scene from 100 years ago, when life was simpler and families were functional. Maybe that is why Thomas Kincaid, the artist of light, has become a zillionaire. He has managed to capture on canvas the deep longing in our souls for peace on earth and goodwill toward neighbors – that for which we were created.

I

You gotta give Mary a lot of credit in our New Testament lesson today. This 13-year-old girl from a small town way out in the country stepped up to the plate in a major way. Picture this: you are Mary, betrothed to a young carpenter, minding your own business, probably hanging laundry on the clothesline in the back yard, and an angel appears and says that of all the women in the world the Lord God on high has found favor with you and has selected you to be the mother of the Messiah. I don’t know about you, but I would be looking over my shoulder for Allen Fundt to jump out and say, “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera!” I really cannot imagine how shocked and flabbergasted this must have made Mary.

But, to her credit, she didn’t drop the laundry and run into the house and hide under the bed; she didn’t laugh out loud like Sarah when she heard she was going to have a baby in the retirement home; she didn’t shout “No way, Gabre!” The text says that she *considered* what kind of greeting this might be. In other words, she *thought* before she spoke; a lesson for all us. Throughout the Gospel narrative, whenever extraordinary things happened around Mary, she *pondered* them before she spoke or took action.

Mary must have been a very precocious young woman, circumspect and careful; using the mind God had given her with great skill. But consider what happened to her that day! She

was betrothed, not yet married, to Joseph, and the angel of God informed her that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, whose kingdom would have no end. Quite understandably, Mary asked how that could happen, since she didn't have a husband yet. We may smile at her naiveté today; but remember this was about 2,000 years before the sexual revolution. But Gabriel basically said, "Oh, we've already taken care of that; God will send the Holy Spirit who will make that happen."

And then, as if to seal the deal, Gabriel gives Mary a *reference* by informing her that God has already blessed her barren cousin Elizabeth with a child, who is now six months pregnant, reminding her that with God nothing is impossible. And for one brief moment, the future of the whole world hung in the balance – Mary still had time to say no and run for cover – yet, she said, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Wow! Isn't that amazing? No wonder Mary has been venerated through the centuries as a role model of faith and faithfulness.

In our Advent Bible study this week we learned that the first thing Mary did was to walk 70 miles to visit her cousin Elizabeth -- probably not to fact check Gabriel's story but to talk with someone about this incredible experience – someone who could and would understand, because she had been through a similar experience. And Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. I can imagine they had a lot to talk about and that they became very close during their time together. Both Mary and Elizabeth stand in a long line of ordinary people God called into service to carry out his plan of redemption: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, David, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ruth and Esther.

Most of these people were equally surprised and perplexed that God had *singled* them out and even reluctant to take on such a huge task. But the messengers always told them not to be afraid and that God would provide them with what they needed to get the job done. As we like to say around here: "God doesn't call the *qualified* but *qualifies* the called." Mary was hardly qualified for this position; she probably didn't even know to *spell* resume, let alone have one. She was an *ordinary* woman who lived in a small town far from the halls of power and influence. Yet, God called her for such a task as this. Talk about *counterintuitive*. No wonder so many people have trouble seeing the hand of God in their lives; God rarely shows up dressed in divine clothing. Don't you just hate that?

II

One of things that threw the establishment off balance was the notion that God sent the long-awaited Messiah into the world as a *baby*, a baby born in a *barn*, no less, to an unknown young couple from nowhere who were temporarily homeless. Not exactly what you would expect. Faith Hill has a new Christmas song out entitled *A Baby Changes Everything*. Most parents can relate to that. When our first daughter, Katie, was born, all my friends and relatives who were parents told us that our lives would be *radically changed* forever. I *heard* what they said, but the *gravity* of those words didn't sink in until I was sitting in the new rocking chair at 2:00 a.m. rocking our new bundle of joy with great fury and exasperation. "So, this is what they meant!" I said. When a baby enters your home, for the next 20 plus years, your daily routine and your whole life revolve around that helpless, crying, smelly, fussy and demanding bundle of joy.

And *this* baby, whom Gabriel told Mary to name Jesus, which in Hebrew means *to save*, would change world history. This baby not only changed Mary and Joseph's life; he wants to change *ours* too. Maybe that is why so many people have a love-hate relationship with Christmas. Someone the other day said that when I asked in my sermon on the First Sunday of Advent four weeks ago "are you ready for Christmas?" her anxiety level went up. This season is full of so many expectations – great expectations. We all worry about finding the perfect gift for everyone, and getting the whole family together – which is particularly difficult for half of the population who now live in blended families. (My mother invited my sister's former husband to Thanksgiving dinner this year, until my sister and her new husband vetoed it!) For *one day*, we want all our problems and challenges to go away, so we can have that perfect Norman Rockwell Christmas around the tree.

But the real message of Christmas is not denial, but reality – the reality that we are all sinners in the hand of a *loving God* who wants to change our lives from the tentative and flawed ones that they are into lives filled with joy and peace, meaning and purpose. Let me give you an example of what Christmas is really about. We are trained from an early age to equate Christmas with receiving gifts. My parents took my sisters and me to Sears and Roebuck when we were children and sat us on Santa's lap and we got to ask for *anything* we wanted. That was before malls were built. Every year I asked for a *pony* and had to settle for an electric train set or a cowboy costume or a bicycle. One of our members is moonlighting this year as Santa Claus. Last week he asked a little girl sitting in his lap what she wanted for Christmas. She said, "All I

want for Christmas is a cross to hang on my bedroom wall.” Can you believe that? Where did she get that idea?

I read a story from the internet this week about a boy who came home from school upset because a classmate had told him that there was no Santa Claus, and he was crushed. His mother sat him down and asked him if there was anyone in his class that needed anything. He told him about Billy, whose family was so poor that they could not afford to buy him a winter coat. During the winter months his mother had been sending a note to the teacher telling her that Billy had a cold and not to let him go outside during recess. The mother gave him ten dollars and they went shopping. Since Billy was about the same height and weight, he found a coat that fit him and took it up to the counter and laid it and the ten dollar bill in front of the sales clerk. The clerk asked if it was a Christmas gift; and he said that it was for a classmate of his who didn't own a coat. The woman smiled and removed the price tag from the coat and told him what a kind and generous thing he was doing.

Several weeks later, the young boy was looking for a pencil on his mother's desk and happened to see the sales receipt in his mother's papers, attached to a price tag for \$19.95. “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” and he lives in the hearts and lives of all those who catch the spirit of the baby born in a stable 2000 years ago. A baby who grew up and showed the world the real meaning of life was love and generosity – and discovering that we are all in this together and that we are our brothers and sisters keeper.

III

Speaking of *barns*, someone sent me another story from internet this week about a mouse that peered outside of his hole in the wall and noticed that the farmer's wife had just bought a mouse trap. Horrified, he ran into the barn and told the chicken “there's a mousetrap in the house.” To which the chicken replied, “I san see that you are most frightened by this development, but a mouse trap is of no concern to me; be gone!” The frantic mouse carried the same urgent message to the pig, who said the same thing: “This is of no concern to me.” And next he delivered the message of doom to the cow, who answered in kind.

In the middle of the night the wife heard a loud snap and went to inspect the mousetrap in the dark. She didn't realize that a venomous snake had been caught in the trap; it bit her on the hand. They took her to the hospital for treatment, and a few neighbors came over to help out with the household chores and to comfort the farmer's husband. With the extra people around,

the farmer needed extra food, so he killed the chicken to feed everyone. When her condition worsened, more people came by to sit with the husband, and he needed more food. So he killed the pig. After she died, so many people came over for the wake, that her husband killed the cow to feed the crowd – all which the little mouse watched from his hole in the wall.

Yes, friends, the message of Christmas is that we are all in this *together*. That we are all God's children, and anything that harms another, harms us. You have to hand *Mary* a lot of credit. What God asked her to do – *humanly* speaking – was impossible. She was an unmarried, thirteen-year-old girl, just beginning her adult life. You have to give *Joseph* some credit too. He got on board too; when he could have easily jumped ship. But as the angel said, "With God nothing is impossible." Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Let us pray.

¹ p. 50, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 36, No. 4, October by William H. Willimon, Logos Production, Oct. – Dec., 2008