

BIRTHING A PROMISE ¹
Luke 1: 26-38
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Generally speaking, the closer we get to Christmas, the shorter sermons ought to be. The deepest truth always seems to overflow the cup of reason. So we rely on things that reach down beneath the level of logical reasoning— things like music and drama and symbol. Great love can never be reduced to logic, and Christmas is fundamentally a story of the greatest love there is.

I

The scene on this Sunday before Christmas is that of a young woman's face, the face of perplexity and fear and surprise. Her name is Mary, and she has just encountered the voice of an angel. It's worth noting that in biblical lore, this is not just any angel. It is Gabriel. And Gabriel has a special role among all the angels of the Bible. He is not one who asks questions or gives options. He announces. He blows his horn. He shouts out what is!

So here is Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will *conceive in*

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her womb and bear a son. And if that is not enough to elicit a response, nothing would be! Why doesn't she interrupt Gabriel at that point and say, "Wait a minute! I can't be pregnant! Joseph might break our engagement! My parents might disown me! My friends might turn their backs! For God's sake, the legalists in town might want to stone me!"

But if she had any of those responses, they are not part of the story. We just see her standing there with a stunned and puzzled look on her face. *She was much perplexed by his words*, the text says, and I suppose there is hardly a greater understatement in the Bible!

But Gabriel is not through yet. He has another announcement. Not only will she conceive, but she will have a baby boy, and Gabriel even announces his name: *...you will name him Jesus.* Gabriel the announcer is not into asking questions or giving options. He never says, "Well, Mary, how do you like the name Jesus? Or would you rather name him Mosheq or Davidq or Sethq?"

So the Christmas story really begins with a shocking announcement, an announcement that life will not be the same as before for Mary. It was an announcement that meant facing a new life for her. It was stunning news; it meant a new beginning; it was really a new day. It is exciting and perplexing all at the same time.

II

In this story Mary says very little in response to this shocking news. Toward the end of Luke's Christmas story we are told that *Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.*² Some news needs pondering more than explanations, contemplation more than pronouncements.

Perhaps that was the thought behind one of the most ancient hymns in our hymnbook. A little church in the 4th century left a printed liturgy that was only translated from the Greek into English in 1869. It is a little poem, which was apparently sung or chanted in this 4th century congregation, and it happens to be a Christmas poem. It goes like this:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.*

We sing it every Christmas and we still sing it at the close of our service today. But it strikes me that at this early moment in the history of the church, a time when Christology (as theologians call it) was still being formed, that this early church spoke of keeping silence before the mystery

² Luke 2:19.

of the incarnation. It is a mystery. It is a mystery that we will never be able to explain because it is beyond logic. But some things don't need explanation, they need silence— they need pondering— they ultimately need worship.

But the line in that poem that has struck me this week is this one which refers to the way Christ came to earth: *For with blessing in his hand.* Think of that! The divine coming into the world with blessing in his hand, not with a sword or a spear or with a lightning bolt. There are so many ways that the divine could enter the world, and they lived in a culture in which the predominant way that divinities seemed to relate to the world was with violence. The fundamental competition among religions was around this assertion: ~~My~~ My god is stronger, tougher, meaner, than your god!+ But here we have a poem that speaks of Christ coming to the world *with blessing in his hand!*

With that in mind, I want to ask you to shift your thinking from the surprise of Mary at the appearance of the angel Gabriel, to the shock of a group of shepherds on a hillside who see a vision of the sky full of angels. Unlike Mary, these were rough men. Think of them as tough guys who wore leather and rode Harleys, chewed Red Man and drank long-necked Buds. They flexed muscles with tattoos on their biceps. They knew the

seamier side of life and had tasted injustice. To them, if the divine would appear in the world at all, it would be to take revenge on those who had dispensed injustice.

And sure enough, when they see a vision of angels in the sky, what do they see? They see what the scripture calls *a multitude of the heavenly host*.³ That's Bible talk for an army! What we have pictured here is not a collection of sweet little angels with wings, but a divine army in full battle gear, ready (they assumed) to take revenge on all the injustice and cruelty of the world.

And at the front of that army is none other than our old friend Gabriel the announcer, ready to shout out the news of exactly who is going to receive the wrath of this divine army. But what Gabriel announces is just the opposite. God is not entering the world through an army, but through a baby! God is not wreaking havoc on the world, but is wreaking a breathtaking kind of love on the world! This is the shocking news of Christmas, a piece of news that the world is still in desperate need to hear.

Then the army of angels, who for all practical purposes seem to be just out of Fort Bragg ready for battle, clears their throats and starts to sing in beautiful harmony, not about defeating their enemies in battle, but about

³ Luke 2:13.

giving what the world so desperately needs: peace on earth! The story is absolutely breathtaking! The world of logic sees only missiles and aircraft carriers and stealth bombers. The world of faith sees in this story the hope of peace.

III

I was in a group of ministers this week who were asked, "What makes you feel vulnerable? And what makes you feel hopeful?" In answer, some spoke of feeling vulnerable because of their health, or the ice storm, or their age, or other factors; but to a person they also spoke of hope—hope that God really does come to us still with nothing less than blessing! In the midst of multiple reasons to feel vulnerable, there is also hope not only for ourselves, but for our world.

It is a high and holy privilege to celebrate this birth with a congregation that, like its Lord, bears a blessing in its hand.