

“Rich Promises”

Luke 1: 26-28

Part IV of VI in “Home for Christmas” Sermon Series

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December 20, 2020

From the Pulpit

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Luke 1: 26-28

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Prayer for Illumination: In these moments, O God,
may your Holy Spirit illumine these words.

Silence in us any voice but your own, that as your Word
is proclaimed we may hear what you have for us this day.

Amen.

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There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a Netflix original, when the kids came into the room.

“Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?”

He really didn’t want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise ones from the East. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewelry that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. “I am all three wisemen,” she said. “I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud.”¹

These children somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story, what strikes me in this story is the circumstance and mud.

The Christmas Story is messy. From the Annunciation text we hear today and the perplexing news from Angel Gabriel in Nazareth to the strange narrative we will soon hear about THE babe born in Bethlehem.

I always see the Angel Gabriel, being sent by God to Mary, not as some pristine, cloaked in white kind of heavenly creature, but one whose wings are a little bent and ripped from all the travels and tribulations of being that heavenly messenger. You can imagine Gabe got bounced out of a few watering holes in his time when he tried to be Greetings to God’s favored ones.

There’s no doubt the message Gabriel brings to Mary is important. It will change the world. Even Mary, couldn’t quite believe it. “Who me? Gabriel, are you sure you have the right Mary?”

What a bold proclamation from Gabriel! What assertive fortitude to claim for God that the Holy Spirit would come and she would bear a child and THAT child would be called the Son of God! A pretty outrageous tale.

Don't you wish for a birth narrative that made more sense? Have you ever tried sharing the Christmas Story with someone who knows nothing about Christmas? Let's say you share the ABCs of Christmas with the person and they are still with you when you get to V for Virgin---then you are on the right path of sharing the Christmas story. They may have a question or two about this part of the narrative.

It is absurd to think that God would choose this plan - this pretty unbelievable scheme. The craziest part of all was the idea that God was born into the world as a human baby.

It has always been the claim of the Bible and the church that God was in Jesus in a way different than God is in the rest of us. Incarnation is what the church has called this phenomenon. It's impossible to explain incarnation. In order to talk about it at all, one must feel comfortable with the language of mystery.

How are you talking about Mystery? Which is a problem for me. I've never been very comfortable with the language of mystery.

So, when it comes to issues of Jesus' divine parenthood, I've always been a little fuzzy. "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" I was once asked by a concerned parishioner. "I think so. Yeah, sure. Yes." I told him. But then I had a question for him, "Now what exactly did I just sign up for?"²

What exactly is incarnation?

The Bible is not always helpful answering that question. Sometimes I think the Bible is unnecessarily vague about Jesus' parentage.

This is what the angel Gabriel told Mary about the divine conception. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." That explains everything doesn't it?

The Gospel of John explains incarnation in this way. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth." Those are beautiful words but they leave me with more questions than answers.

Perhaps an ancient doctrine of the Church will help clear it up. The Nicene Creed, written in the 4th century, speaks of incarnation this way, describing Jesus as "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven...." blah, blah, blah, blah, blah

Again this is beautiful language cloaked in mystery, draped in poetry. I'm sure I would believe those words if I understood them.

I prefer Luke's version of the birth narrative. Luke's description of the birth of Jesus is all prose and no poetry.

He doesn't use many words but he paints a picture of dirt and sweat and pain and surprise and joy and real people giving birth to a real child. He paints a picture of a young couple far away from home forced to improvise, to make do with what they could find. That GOD is making do with what GOD can find.

The savior of the world was born in a guest room that doubled as the barn and spent his first night in a water trough. That is what incarnation looks like. It is – by definition – gritty, grounded, raw, real.

Luke's version helps us grasp the immensity of all of this and the absurdity of it.

In the incarnation, God decided to abandon heaven for earth, trading power and glory for diapers and a teething ring.

What kind of God would do such a thing? **A God who is crazy in love *with us***. A God who is not afraid to look helpless and weak because what is a baby other than helpless and weak.

In the birth of Jesus, God says to us, “I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are, to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all because I love you enough to become one of you.”³

God's desire to be near us was so great that God came down from heaven and lived and loved and suffered and rejoiced and did the dishes and washed hands and wore a mask and stayed 6 feet apart from the person in front and told jokes and knew sorrow and experienced suffering and knows what it is to be human.

In Jesus, through Jesus, God understands suffering and pain, death and loss. In Jesus, through Jesus, God understands all of it. Maybe this year more than any we need to be reminded that God isn't far

away or distant but that God is up close. Boy don't we need to hear that rich promise again right now.

It's Gabriel who proclaimed to Mary that all this would happen. In the circumstance and mud in which she found herself, Mary would bring the Son of God into the world. What an incredible commitment God made and Mary made too.

What a risk Mary took when she says yes. "Yes, God, I will risk loving you." What Mary is willing to do is to be the God Bearer! She accepts this opportunity to bring God into the world.

What new possibilities come to us? In our interactions with family and friends, in our work relationships, in those we pass on the streets, or those who think differently than we do, may we remember that we have a role in bringing God into the world. With the rich promises of God being with us in this world, what God is asking of Mary--what God is asking of us-- is to bring God into the world as well and say Yes to God.

It is five days before Christmas.

My hope and prayer is that as we enter--yet again--into this oh-so-familiar story...

...a story of a young mother finding out she would bear God into the world as a baby boy.

...a story of an earthly father who had the decency to believe his fiancée and stay by her side.

...a story of the Lord of hosts--our savior--born and laid in manger, whose power is located in vulnerability and selfless love.⁴

My hope and prayer is that through that story we might discover--once again--a truth about God's incredible commitment to us and this world that might lead us to watch for the ways that God is still active within human history...in our very lives...in this very world...to bring about salvation.

AMEN.

¹ www.day1.org Story (James Moore, Advent Bible Study) in a sermon from Rev. Dr. Ken Carter.

² Rev. Amy Miracle, "The Nod" sermon workshop 2014.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Cowley Publications, 1998), p. 50.

⁴ Rev. Pendelton Peery, "The Reality of Christmas" December 21, 2014 https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003abc/the_reality_of_christmas.