

Sermon December 18

“Omen of Joy”

Have you ever had an encounter with an angel? It’s surprising how many people have. So what are angels like? We’ve all see the paintings of angels in white robes and white feathered wings, but people who have met angels give a wide range of descriptions. For Hanna, it was just a voice warning her not to get into a boat. The boat capsized, and she was convinced it was an angel she heard. For Christel, it was when she had her second miscarriage. The night before she went to the doctor and found out she was no longer pregnant, a little boy came into her room with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a white light all around him. He told her, “Don’t cry mommy, everything will be alright, you will see us again someday.”

For Frank, it was the woman who came into his youngest brother’s hospital room while he and Frank were deep in grief, trying to deal with his brother’s unexpected diagnosis of terminal cancer. She spoke with his brother at length, bringing him to a place of real peace, and then left. When Frank asked the nurses at the reception desk right across the room who this visitor was, they were adamant that no one had been allowed into the room. For Alice, who was suffering with a chronic illness, the angel was a feminine visitor who wrapped her in her wings. She says these wings weren’t covered with feathers, but in a crystal-like substance with hundreds of facets filled with very light colored light. They were fluid with movement yet felt very strong. She says they were absolutely beautiful and completely other-worldly. This angel visited her on three separate occasions, bringing her peace and comfort.

What do you think the angel Gabriel was like when he appeared to Mary? The Bible doesn’t say. Surprisingly, the Qur’an does. It has a chapter named Mary, and it says that Gabriel appeared to her in the form of a well-proportioned man. That’s consistent with some Bible passages that show angels as simply looking like people—Hebrews 13 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” But the Bible also shows angels as being in dazzling white and blazing glory, or not being visible at all.

This story of the encounter between Gabriel and Mary appears only in this one brief place in our Bible. Matthew’s account is very different—the angel appears to Joseph in a dream, not to Mary, who is barely mentioned. But it’s obvious that this story touches us deeply, because Mary became a central figure in Christianity. In the Orthodox Church, she is known as Theotokos, or the Mother

of God. Catholic churches have statues of Mary. Even in Islam, the mihrab, or niche that indicates the direction of prayer, is typically dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

But for us Protestants, Mary is practically invisible. In fact, we only tend to speak of her at all during this brief time around Christmas. Although the Reformation certainly brought many benefits to the church, one of the challenges it has left us with is that we don't have much in the way of feminine images for the Holy. We may know intellectually that God transcends male and female, and includes them both, but without feminine images for contemplation and prayer, it is very difficult for the feminine qualities of the divine to touch our hearts. We might even consider whether the damage we are doing to our planet, by treating Mother Earth as an object to be exploited rather than our nurturing home, could be related to this tendency to over-masculinize our images of God.

Last Christmas, Kay, Kay's sister Pat and I decided to spend Christmas Day making meals for homeless people and delivering them where the people are—under the Viaduct, in Pioneer Square, and near Pike Place Market. We made turkey sandwiches, home-made cookies wrapped with a ribbon, fresh fruit, and included a protein nutrition bar and a candy cane. We took jugs of hot cider and coffee, and paper cups, and did the rounds. Pat even brought new pairs of socks and some t-shirts.

People were tremendously appreciative. We were surprised to discover that most people couldn't or wouldn't drink coffee, but they really liked having some hot cider on a chilly Christmas Day.

We'd like to go out again this year, after our Christmas service. If any of you are interested in participating, come and talk with us after the service.

Those are people who hadn't made it to a shelter, who hadn't joined a tent city. They're probably a lot like the people Jesus used to hang out with.

The Virgin Mary wasn't quite that far down the totem pole, but she wasn't far above it. She was engaged to a carpenter. In our culture, being a carpenter is a very respectable profession, but at that time and place, working as a carpenter meant you didn't own any land, so you couldn't grow food. So a carpenter was just one step from starvation. If you got sick, or broke your arm, or got old, you had nothing to fall back on but begging.

And Nazareth, where Mary lived, was kind of an out-of-the-way backwater. And Mary was a woman in a culture that valued men—probably a teenager. And yet it was to her, to this girl near the bottom of the social pecking order, that the angel Gabriel came, with the words, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” It’s no wonder that Mary was perplexed by these words.

We have heard the Christmas stories every year since childhood. They become warm and comforting, stories with a happy ending. But there is the risk that we will fall into thinking, “Oh, I know that story,” and not ask ourselves afresh, “What does this story mean to us today? How can we understand it more deeply? What does it ask of me?” So I’d like to ask us today to hear this story not as we heard it as children, but as an adult community of faith, listening deeply for God’s message to us in today’s reading.

Mary is not only perplexed, but probably frightened, because the angel says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary...” But then he goes on to tell her that she will conceive, and bear a son, and name him Jesus, who will be called the Son of the Most High. Mary wonders how this can be, and Gabriel tells her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

And Mary gives a remarkable answer—she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” What an astonishing quality of acceptance! She doesn’t laugh, as Sarah did when the angel told Abraham that she would have a child. She doesn’t say “You must be crazy.” She doesn’t say, “Let me think about it for a while—I’ll get back to you.” She simply says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

It’s easy enough to fantasize that when God’s angel comes and tells us that the power of the Most High is going to overshadow us, that we could give Mary’s answer. But I have to admit that when I have been confronted by that numinous energy, by that awesome power, I have found that actually being able to stay open and to say yes is much harder than fantasizing about doing it. But God may call us—and that is our opportunity. That call may only come once. We need to be ready to say yes.

That receptivity, that acceptance, not through force or collapse but through conscious willingness, is an essential feminine characteristic, and Mary is our

perfect model for it. Theologians tell us that all souls are feminine before God, and when you encounter that astonishing power, you realize that it is active and you can only be receptive in the face of it. But you do have a choice—the choice to shut down, to close, to defend, or to open, to receive, to accept. If Mary had said no, the Christ child would not have been born to her.

I know that every time I feel the presence of an angel, of the sacred, even in small ways, I continue to practice saying “yes.” I hope that if I can do that consistently in small things, I may be able to do it when and if a big thing is offered. I would invite each of you to find your way of doing this—of practicing saying yes, of saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The 14th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once said, “What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to a Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?” For us to give birth to the Son requires that we be able to offer that surrender, that acceptance, that “yes.” How else can we help birth God’s promise in the world? As we move forward into Christmas, as we move forward in the Journey of Discovery, as we move forward in our lives together as Christians, let each of us carry this prayer with us over and over: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”