

From the Mother

Hillsboro Presbyterian Church "Christmas Greetings!" December 11, 2011 Pastor Michael McCall

Advent is the pre-Christmas season when we anticipate the coming of Christ into human history and into our own lives. In this message we hear "Christmas Greetings" from two sources, one from the heavenly realm through God's messenger Gabriel - and one from the human realm in the voice of Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus. Gabriel is announcing to Mary what God intends to do. And though we know how the story turns out, I like to think that back when it happened there were heavenly beings watching how this drama would play out. Our text is **Luke 1:26-38**.

Gabriel the angel is a little bit like God's stork, at least in Luke's Gospel. Gabriel first appears in the Jerusalem temple to the priest Zechariah, to tell him Baby John the Baptizer is on the way. 6 months later, Gabriel appears in Galilee to Mary. Scripture affirms the reality of angels. They are not apparitions, hallucinations, or fantasies. The Bible is transparent about the ways God communicates. When someone receives a dream from God, it says so, and calls it a dream. When it is a waking vision, the Bible calls it a vision. So when it says, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, it means there was a perceptible messenger from God - "messenger", that's what angel means - and this angel has a name, and he appears in a specific place rooted in geography and history. This is not a projection of Mary's subconscious! Gabriel appears to Mary. There's no mention of anyone else being around. Whether she was in a quiet room of her family's stone and mud home complex, or perhaps on an errand or a walk on the surrounding hillside, this young teenager - perhaps 13 or 14 - is about to face a life-changing experience that will demand a life-changing decision on her part.

1:26-27 "...God sent the angel Gabriel...to a virgin pledged to Joseph...(her) name was Mary"

In those days engagement was a strict matter. A betrothed girl was practically sequestered or at least surrounded by other women for protection so that no one - including her fiancé - could be intimate with her. Though the birth is miraculous, Jesus is to have both male and female parents. Joseph is "**a descendant of David**", anchoring the family in the messianic tradition and expectation.

1:28-33 "...Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

The word "Greetings" really means something like "Rejoice!"...but most translations water it down to "Hi". "You are favored" means "God is with you." But Mary's not so sure. First there is the shock of having an angel APPEAR to her, then to SPEAK to her...in a way that is familiar, optimistic, and upbeat. Mary being "**greatly troubled**" here may simply mean: "stranger danger!" The women at the tomb on resurrection morning did not realize they were talking to angels...Mary may not either. The angel seems to pick up on this: "**Do not be afraid, Mary**" (I've come on too strong haven't I? Sorry. What I'm trying to say is that God loves you and has special plans for you.) Gabriel is displaying a more gentle, trustworthy demeanor now... "You are going to have a baby, a son. He is so special you must name him "Yeshua" (Jesus) meaning "the LORD saves". Then Gabriel goes on with 4 other descriptions of how important this son will be...all label her son as the long-awaited Messiah.

1:34-38 "How (?)'...'Nothing is impossible with God'...'I am the Lord's servant. (Let it be.)"

Mary asks the obvious question: "**How...since I have never known a man (in the biblical way).**"

Gabriel explains something like, "**God can...if fact God will...SO THAT the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.**" Gabriel even offers some tangible evidence, "**Your Aunt Betty who always wanted children is now preggers and she is pushing 50!...God can do anything.**"

Heaven holds its breath to hear Mary's response. Mary reflects before she answers...in 1:29 Mary "**wondered**"...like she will when the shepherds leave in 2:19. Mary's response: "**I put myself in the Lord's service...whatever God wants.**" What poise, maturity, and faith for a teenager! Mary is basically saying, "**I believe your message, and I believe it's from God. I know God, and I am willing, if He has chosen me, to do whatever is necessary.**" Wow.

Now God's plan will move forward. Gabriel had announced what God intended, but just like you and me, Mary had freedom of choice. She could have declined as well as consented. She could have complained instead of complied. And God would not have forced her; God doesn't force His will on any of us. But thanks be to God, Mary did agree. She neither argued nor negotiated. Mary expressed her trust in God and her willingness to serve. And then, suddenly, the angel was gone - without any warm fuzzy affirmations, no "thanks", no instructions about what would happen next.

Mary is left alone, probably somewhat stunned. And there in the quiet, alone with her thoughts, she replays the last few mind-boggling moments in her mind. Whew!

Of course Mary is not really alone, and gradually she realizes that, as Gabriel had said, the Holy Spirit... "**the helper**" is with her to minister to her in this moment of radical transition. Because now reality asserts itself, and the temptation to worry floods over her: "What do I tell my parents? What will our neighbors think? What about Joseph? Is my baby going to be regarded as illegitimate? What have I just agreed to? Who can I talk to?" Well, Gabriel had given her a hint, and she picks up on it. In the very next verse she gets out of town and goes to spend time with the only one in her world who could really understand: her Aunt Elizabeth. I picture Elizabeth as Mary's favorite aunt who always treated her as her own. And Uncle Zeke was a priest...maybe he could give Mary some insights from the scriptures. Mary heads south to Jerusalem where her relatives live (a trip, we know, she and Joseph will be making in 9 months). There Mary and Elizabeth compare notes and encourage one another during this incomparable, world-altering season of pregnancy that they experience together. Certainly these women experienced a once-in-a-lifetime - once-in-eternity connection - a time pregnant with what was to come. During that time Mary the teenager became Mary the young woman. Mary stayed long enough to help Elizabeth through the birth of Baby John and in the process grew in her confidence as the one who soon would bear the Savior.

The name "Christopher" means "Christ bearer"... "one who carries Christ". Mary was the original Christ bearer as she literally bore Christ into the world. There will never be another mother of the Lord; her call was unique. But there is another way of bearing Christ, isn't there? We all can bear the Savior of the world into the world, can't we? Doesn't God call us all to be "Christophers", Christ-bearers, in word and deed? And like Mary, God comes to us - like Gabriel did, like I am doing - and asks us. Mary said "**Yes**" and became one of the ultimate role models for other Christians. "**Got something for me to do, Lord? - I am at your service.**" That's how I want to be, too. I want to be willing to bear Christ and His love out these doors and into a hurting world. During this season, let us all spread the love around right where we are, in our families, at our schools, in our workplaces and our communities. Generally we aren't called to world-altering opportunities like Mary was, but our own day-to-day calls can often be life-changing. The Christmas season is a time for giving, yes and presents are fun, but your presence is better. And as Christians, your presence carries with it the love of the Christchild Himself. So hear God's messenger say to YOU: "**Greetings! You who are favored by God for the Lord is with you!**" And may you respond like Mary: "**I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as God has said.**" Amen.