

First Presbyterian Church
December 23, 2012
Rev. Pen Peery

The Reality of Christmas

Luke 1:26-38
Advent 4, 2012

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to 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.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

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If your house and your life are anything like my house and my life at this time of year, then maybe we should spend these next 15 minutes in silent meditation.

It is two days before Christmas.
Many of us have family coming into town if they are not here already.

The kids are out of school.

There is food to prepare, presents to wrap (maybe, even, to buy...), and a house to clean.

It is two days before Christmas.

The waiting is almost over...and for some (like a certain six year old in my house who provides daily lamentation), the waiting has been hard.

It is two days before Christmas.

A time that – for many of us – is often full of emotion: where we feel the extra weight of a loss or a broken relationship. And this year, a time – for all of us – that has been made heavier by the national tragedy of Newtown, Connecticut.

If your house and your life are anything like my house and my life then perhaps you know how easy it is to speed right through Christmas. To be in such a hurry that we miss the holy rhythms of this season; miss the joy; miss the gift of being with family (even if they sometimes drive us crazy); and miss the wonder of the babe in the manger who entered our world that we might have life.

I have a guess that there is something else we miss because we are so busy and because it is so familiar – and that is we might miss the audacity of this story we just heard this morning. A story that stands at the beginning of the gospel; this story about how the One we call Lord came to be – fully human and fully divine.

Think about it:

An angel named Gabriel makes an appearance to a teenage girl.

Gabriel announces that this teenage girl, still a virgin, would conceive a son.

That this son would be the Son of the Most High – a King who would fulfill the hopes of the House of David.

That Mary's relative, Elizabeth, had also had an angelic encounter and a miraculous conception.

And...to all of these incredible and incredibly demanding requests – the teenager named Mary said yes! –

“Let it be with me according to your word...”

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Not everyone misses how audacious this story sounds.

When I was an undergraduate at Chapel Hill I took a New Testament Survey class from a professor named Bart Ehrman. Dr. Ehrman's class was among the most popular at the school in part because he was extremely provocative. He was (and is) a great teacher who engaged with his students and had a command of both the Bible and early Christian writings that were not included in the Bible. Dr. Ehrman is also an acknowledged agnostic who is skeptical of the fantastic nature of the stories contained in scripture.

I think about Dr. Ehrman every year at Christmas because he usually pops up on the radio or in the newspapers for the purpose of provoking the public. Just recently, I read

an article he wrote for Newsweek. Here's the argument he usually presents at this time of year:

The stories that have shaped the Christian movement are fraught with inconsistency. Even the gospels themselves do not match up. Matthew's story of Christ's birth cannot be reconciled with Luke's. In Matthew and Luke's gospel there are competing genealogies that trace Jesus' family tree back to different people. In Matthew, the magi were the ones who first heard about the new King of the Jews. In Luke it was the shepherds. In Matthew, Joseph is the one who gets visited by an angel. In Luke, it is Mary.

Further, Ehrman's argument continues, the church has staked its claim of understanding the Christian faith as "true" on events – like the virgin birth, and resurrection – that are pre-modern constructions which could not possibly be true.

When all of this is taken into account, Ehrman believes, it is hard to understand how it is possible to affirm the kind of faith that we know of as Christianity.

I remember the first time I heard Dr. Ehrman share these thoughts. It caused me to examine my own deeply held beliefs about scripture and about my faith in general. From birth, I have been a Presbyterian...I didn't grow up in a fundamentalist church, so I wasn't threatened by the idea that the Bible had inconsistencies within it. I knew that it was a challenge to take every word the Bible says literally. And in my heart I knew the core beliefs of the Christian faith to be true – Apostle's Creed kind of things – that God created the world, sent his only Son, that Jesus was born, that he was crucified, that he was raised.

Still, I wondered, how do we explain these things? How can we prove that what we believe is true in a way that is convincing to others (and, let's be honest, in a way that is convincing to us)?

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What do we do with stories like the one I read this morning if we think that our faith is something we need to prove?

One option is that we can explain away what seems to us to be impossible. We can make the story of the Virgin Mary being visited by an angel who announced the birth of the savior of the world a metaphor for some more generic version of truth. This gets us out of the embarrassing parts of our Christian story that seem at odds with a modern understand of the world. For we know that a virgin birth and angelic visits are impossible, right?

Another option is that we can really dig in and defend the story; to enshrine the stories of scripture in something more systematic. It was just a generation or two ago and in the Presbyterian church that every pastor or elder or deacon had to ascribe to a certain

list of doctrines – among them the doctrine of the Virgin Birth in order to be admitted into leadership within the church.

Both of those options - understanding the stories of our faith as a metaphor that points to some greater truth, or hammering the stories of our faith into a rigid set of doctrines that must be affirmed in order to make one faithful – both options leave much to be desired.

So what if the point of a story like this one – of the Angel Gabriel announcing that Mary would conceive Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit – what if the point this story is about more than whether or not we can prove its truth? After all...whose needs are served by that proof? Is that need about God or is it about us?

As a friend of mine suggests, what if we could unburden ourselves from our need to prove what we believe and give ourselves over to an outlandish idea: that what scripture describes in Luke chapter 1 might have actually happened?

Rather than be intimidated by our skepticism – by those things that we do not fully understand – what if, instead we might consider that indeed, “roughly 2,000 years ago a messenger of God who had a name, Gabriel, appeared in a vision to a teenage girl who also had a name, Mary, and told her something very much like what the gospel writer says: that, though she was young, and not wealthy or powerful, and not yet married to her husband-to-be, that she was chosen of God to be the bearer of God’s son into the world of human history and time.”¹

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Many, many years ago – when the church of Jesus Christ was a new and fledgling movement – before people of faith gathered in magnificent sanctuaries and in crowds like the one we have this morning – before, even, Christianity became the great religion that it is today...with different denominations and creeds and confessions and systems of doctrine – before the church felt a need to prove itself to the outside world – before that, when the church gathered together, the focus was on telling story of their salvation.

To quote the great theologian H. Richard Niebuhr:

“The preaching of the early Christian Church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience...[rather] it was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.”²

It is easy to forget – all these years later, and with all of our accumulated tradition – that this faith we believe and practice is inherently *historical*. That our faith is not some pie-

¹ The Rev. Dan Lewis, my friend and colleague and fellow member of The Well (Davidson, 2011)

² Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Meaning of Revelation*. New York: Macmillan, 1941, p. 31. (with thanks to the Rev. Dan Lewis)

in-the-sky exercise in higher level thinking, but that it is based on something that actually happened.

Again, as my friend says, it is easy to forget “that the content of our religion is less a system of dogma than a relationship with a living God, who has entered human history in the person of Jesus the Christ.”³

According to Luke’s gospel, it was Mary who first learned that God was about to do something big; that God was going to act in such a dramatic fashion within human history.

While we typically read this story just before Christmas, our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox Church make a much bigger deal out of Mary’s encounter with Gabriel. Gabriel’s announcement to Mary took place before the first Christmas, of course. 40 weeks before – assuming Mary carried Jesus to term. The Orthodox Church celebrates God’s decision to enter human history by setting apart a special festival – called the Feast of Annunciation – which takes place about nine months before Christmas, in the early spring.

Every once in a while, the stars align, and the Feast of Annunciation falls on the same day as Easter Sunday. Think for a second about that combination: a celebration of God acting to enter into human history and a celebration of God raising the son that he sent in order to redeem the totality of human history.

The Orthodox Church has named this rare occurrence - *Kyriopascha*. It happens, on average, every few hundred years. The last time it occurred was in 1991, the year the Soviet Union fell and millions of Russian Orthodox Christians were freed to worship as they please.⁴

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It is two 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.

My hope and prayer is that through that story we might discover – once again – a truth that so real that it does not depend on our ability to prove or comprehend it.

³ Lewis

⁴ Lewis

Indeed, 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.

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