

“An In Tents Christmas”
II Samuel 7:1-11, 16 and Luke 1: 26-38
December 18, 2011

Being a messenger of God can be intense. The Almighty, always pressing forward toward whatever is new and good and gracious, gives a message to a prophet or to an angel like me. We are sent to bear the news to you human beings. Once in a while an entire host of us heavenly messengers have the distinct opportunity to sing the news together, like we did one night in the skies above the little town of Bethlehem. Astonished shepherds heard the lyrics and danced their way to a manger to see the gift God had sent for the whole world. What an amazing night that was! What a wondrous work God accomplished. God’s very word took on flesh. Grace, mercy, joy, hope, love were given shape in a baby, of all things. But I am getting ahead of my story!

Even before that Child was born, I was sent to get things ready. The mission was almost impossible, it seemed to me, because, like I told you, the news I bore was more than any of you could possibly ask or conceive on your own. What made me tense was the fact that maybe, just maybe, the very people to whom I was sent would not trust me - or God who sent me - to keep the word that I was sent to speak! Then I would be out of a job - which is not good at any time, but especially at the holidays!

My first assignment was to speak to a man named Zechariah. The news for him was very good, indeed. His wife, Elizabeth, would have a child, a boy, to be precise. The day I picked to break the news was a very special one for this old priest. Zechariah’s turn to enter the holiest place in the Temple had finally come. He was chosen by lot to go into the Holy of Holies alone to burn incense on the altar. Sometimes, according to what I had heard from other sources, a rope would be tied to one leg of the priest, just in case, while in that holy place, he was overcome by the Holy, he could be pulled out!

Imagine the old priest’s heart beating with the intensity of this special appointment as he finally pressed into the most holy of spaces in the Temple and waited on behalf of the people to hear a message from God. Well, he certainly got a message the day I showed up! “Zechariah!” His face was bowed to the floor but I am sure amazement and fear covered it from top to bottom and side to side. So I told him not to be afraid and assured him that his prayer had been heard. My guess is that the people who were waiting outside for Zechariah’s reappearance with a word for them from the Lord expected he was offering their prayers to God. He was, of course, but his deepest prayer, his daily prayer, was for a child. So even my pulse quickened when I revealed that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son! I told him the boy’s name: John. I announced joy and gladness not only for him and his life partner but also for many people.

What news! Here was this elderly couple, childless all their lives, bearing the embarrassment and shame of this lack in a world that thrust this misunderstanding upon them. But now, a child - their child - was to be born. And good old Zechariah. He should have known I was telling him the truth. After all, as a priest, he would know the scriptures and the stories passed on about Sara and Hannah, to name just two old women who gave birth to sons. So why did he ask, “How will I know?” I suppose he had to account for this wondrous thing with his head.

I thought it was obvious. “I am Gabriel.... God sent me to speak this to you.” It was an intense moment when I added, “and because you did not believe my words, you won’t be able to speak until what I told you has happened.” In other words, Zechariah, when you CAN say something, you will know. Your word will mark the fulfillment.

So Zechariah stumbled out of the Holy of Holies and into the presence of the people who were expecting him to say something but all he could do was gesture, move his hands, flail his arms. They would have to wait to realize how God would usher the new out of the old. They would have to wait until Zechariah said “John” in order to hear God’s initiative and grace crying out, announcing once more that God is able to do what you humans cannot do, and for your sake, because God is gracious. As Promised, Elizabeth conceived the child and praised the Lord.

Meanwhile, my work was not finished. My next assignment was given to me about six months into Elizabeth’s pregnancy. This time I was to be a messenger of good news to a person who was almost the opposite of old Zechariah. I was not sent back to Jerusalem but to an out of the way place called Nazareth. The recipient of my message was not an old, experienced priest, steeped in the ways of the Temple but a girl, barely in her teens. She had no worldly credentials whatever. Her husband-to-be had a connection to the house of David, the greatest king of Israel., but what I was sent to announce to this young woman, this virgin of Israel, could well jeopardize her relationship to a man named Joseph.

Joseph, at least, could claim direct lineage to God’s chosen king, even though David himself once tried to make a place where God could dwell. David wanted to use wood and stone to build a house for God! You humans do this kind of thing. You build temples and monuments to proclaim the supposed permanence of your power, or to put into concrete your own will. When David started his plans for God’s house, God stepped in by way of the messenger Nathan and put an end to that impulse - at least for a while - at least until Solomon plowed ahead and built the Temple in which Zechariah eventually found himself mute in the face of good news.

God told David that God would continue to be in charge, thank you. God would build a house for David, meaning a dynasty of sorts, a lasting kingdom. This would be God’s doing and it would be marvelous for everyone. No house. As God reminded David, God had lived in a tent and had lived among the people wherever they found themselves to be.

I must admit that a tent is more vulnerable than a house of wood and stone, but it is certainly more portable! Fragility is the price paid for mobility. But God was always ready to pull up stakes and move where God had to go, and sleep with God’s people, and be buffeted by the same winds that buffet God’s people. God’s people were always in tents and that’s where God wanted to be, among the people God so loved.

When I looked at the fiancé of Joseph, son of David, she was to me more fragile than any tent - and yet, I was sent to announce to her that God would work in her a wondrous thing.”

Into the silence I spoke to Mary, saying, “Greetings” and then I assured her that she was favored by God and that God was with her. I know such words were not as assuring as they were intended to be. But if I showed up in the middle of your day and spoke those words to you, how

would you feel? Afraid, I trust. After all, I am not one of those little cherubs or porcelain angels with the life baked out of them you can arrange in your house at your own will. I am Gabriel, messenger from God Almighty and I bear a life changing, world making word about new life being born in you!

For Mary, the word will be one made flesh. God speaks and, as it was at the beginning when God spoke, life happens. God utters and enacts all at the same time. Mary had some idea about this because when, like Zechariah she asks “How will I know?”, the word she uses for know is not a question about knowledge. It is a question about relationship, intimacy, connection. She follows up with the truth that she is a virgin, which is to say, by herself she unable to accomplish God’s will. I was not about to give her a biological explanation. I was there to remind her that her inability is not the end of the story. God is at work. I evoked the presence and power of God.

I told her all about Elizabeth, in her old age, in a time of expectancy. God was now at work in Mary, in her young age, doing something for her sake and for the sake of the world like nothing that had ever been done before. “For nothing will be impossible for God.”

Then, the most intense moment: I waited for Mary’s response. She looked at me with her face awash in a mix of wariness, curiosity, caution, boldness, innocence and wisdom. Unable to fully comprehend what God has said to her, Mary says, “Let it be to me according to God’s word.” Let it be to me just as God says - let God’s Word dwell in me richly.” In that moment, Mary became a tent to bear in all her fragility Immanuel, God-with...you!

I knew my work was done for the moment. I departed, fully aware that Mary had no idea how it would all turn out, except she was open to God’s enactments, God’s Word becoming flesh in ways that would eventually break her heart while at the same time giving life to the whole world. Mary was not, like Zechariah, rendered speechless - by doubt, by fear, by her fragility in the face of the winds of life. She said “yes” to God’s word and it became flesh through her, a wellspring of living water. Such was the song we sang in Bethlehem’s star-filled night months later.

As I told Zechariah and as I told Mary, I tell you this day: with God nothing is impossible.

For you who bear the name of Child Mary bore for your sake, will you be more like mute Zechariah or will you pitch your tent with Mary and her Holy Child?

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