



## Hoping for a New Year

**Luke 1:26-38**

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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We continue today in our Advent journey, seeking light in a weary world.

Within the Annual Conference, there's a number of us who serve as mentors for pastors coming through the ordination process. As mentors, we meet once a month with pastors seeking commissioning or ordination, helping them think through and process this vocation of pastoral ministry. I am a mentor for four pastors here in Northern Virginia, who just submitted their papers for the Board of Ordained Ministry on December 1. They will have an interview with the Board in January, after which the Board will decide if they are to be ordained next summer. As a part of helping these pastors write their papers, we spend time in our mentor meetings talking about the questions they are answering.

As we were discussing their papers this fall, I was reflecting on my journey through the ordination process. I remember, in my first round of commissioning interviews, one of the members of the Board of Ordained Ministry asked me this question, in the form of a statement. He said, "Tell me about the Kingdom of God." I responded with something, I can't recall what I said any longer, but whatever I said, it was insufficient for this member of the interview team. He asked again, "Tell me about the Kingdom of God." Again, I responded with something, as I questioned myself, wondering what I had left out the first time. And then he did it again, this time changing his emphasis, "Tell me about the *Kingdom* of God." I honestly have no idea what this interviewer was hoping for in response, but I clearly wasn't providing it. My articulation of the Kingdom of God was clearly lacking.

It's poetic, however frustrating it was in that moment, that try as I might, nothing I could offer was sufficient to define the Kingdom of God.

God's realm is tricky in that way. We can read all of the Biblical text – numerous times; we can read all of the Biblical commentaries – which would be *a lot* of reading; we could search the global expanse seeking the wisdom of the brightest and most learned of theologians, pastors, rabbis, Bishops, and scholars ... and still, our understanding of the Kingdom of God would be lacking. There is no finite definition for the eternal.

And yet, in this season of Advent, what we proclaim is coming at Christmas is a glimpse of God's promise. When trying to define the Kingdom of God, knowing our definition will hardly be sufficient, we often speak of the present and the future Kingdom – or the realized Kingdom, and the Kingdom still to come. When trying to grasp God's Kingdom, we look at the passing inbreaking of God's presence as signs of what is to come in full.

The season of Advent is full of this wonderful interplay between the realms – the full and future Kingdom, and the realized and inbreaking Kingdom. This season reminds us that, even in the promise of what is to come, the love and presence of God is already in our midst. Rev. Jan Richardson offers, “The boundaries of heaven and earth as not as fixed as we think.”<sup>i</sup>

As we move to quickly close out 2020, to put behind us a year we’d love to forget (even knowing we will never forget this year), this paradox of what is and what is not yet stands in stark contrast. The challenge of Advent is to allow this paradox to hold its tension – to stand in the brokenness, to give voice to our weariness, and yet to proclaim the promise of God’s healing in our midst. It’s to mourn the worst and to celebrate the best, all at once.

This paradox is on full display in Luke’s Gospel.

Luke is helpful in providing a timeline in his narrative. In the first half of this chapter, Luke introduces Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents-to-be of John the Baptist. And as we shift to meet Mary, Luke tells us that Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy when 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. This virgin’s name was Mary.

Talk about the inbreaking of God’s presence on Earth.

Luke goes into great detail to describe this holy gathering. His details are important, even though they may be passed over by many of us who claim to know the story already. It is commonplace for us to have this Hallmark Christmas in mind when reading the story from the Biblical text. We’ve been convinced that the story was serene, or cloroxed (to borrow from 2020). But Luke’s Gospel indicates otherwise.

For starters, Luke is intentional about naming the location of this visit. The angel was visiting the region of Galilee, in a town called Nazareth. This is a relatively rural, and suggestively poor community. The region was not a desirable place at the time, regardless how much Christian tourism has boosted the area’s appeal today. For comparison’s sake, we’re not talking Loudon County, we’re talking further out – perhaps Winchester, or Woodstock.

The person to whom the angel will come and speak is a young woman named Mary. There’s some debate among scholars regarding the Greek noun used to describe Mary. In its most direct translation, the noun *parthenos* means little more than “unmarried woman,” with little reference to one’s past intimate experiences. Yet, as we will see, Mary’s response to the angel seems to indicate “virgin” is an acceptable term, and that makes the scene all the more messy. Mary is betrothed – her family has already come to a legally binding agreement with Joseph’s family regarding their marriage. However, the wedding has not yet been consummated. Mary is still living at home under the patriarchal authority of her father. And, because it is uncommon in our time, let us not forget that based on the common practices of their time, Mary is hardly 13 or 14 years old.

She is to be wed to Joseph. Joseph, bless his heart, would be unimportant if it weren't for his direct lineage in the House of David. Joseph's presence as the one who will play the daddy role allows the child to be born into the direct line of King David ... even if not genetically.

And then, we've got Gabriel. We've been fed this unexciting narrative that defines Gabriel as this grossly white angel, with large wings, a golden halo, and a glowing aura – and perhaps we visualize him descending from the heavens to speak with Mary. If I haven't said this before, Jesus wasn't white, and I feel pretty certain neither was Gabriel. Mark's Gospel tell us the singular angel at the tomb post resurrection was dressed in white, while Luke simply says the angels at the tomb were dressed in *dazzling* clothes. But here? The Gospel text says nothing of his clothing. 2,000 years laden with artistic renditions of this scene betray our ears. It was quite commonplace in the ancient near east for angelic characters to be portrayed as nothing more than ordinary persons with divine purpose. With no additional details to define Gabriel, we might best imagine the scene as one of simplified artistry.

Mary, a relatively poor young female, still living with her father, is awaiting the final consummation of her marriage to Joseph. And into her father's house, where she would have spent the majority of her time – perhaps at best in the backyard within eyesight of her father, who, because of the betrothal, won't take any chances on his daughter not being prepared for marriage – comes this rather auspicious character, that only the listening audience knows to be an angel sent by God.

Gabriel says to Mary, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Rightfully, Mary is perplexed. She's wondering what type of greeting this might be. And honestly, who can blame her? Her "Stranger-Danger" vibes are kicking in.

Gabriel can see she's tensing up, and so he quickly says, "*Have no fear*, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." I'm not Mary, but the promise from a strange figure that I'm about to become pregnant doesn't really ease the tension I'm feeling.

But the fear isn't Mary's concern. In listening, Mary seems to have picked up on the indication that her child will take the throne of his ancestor David. Surely she knew of Joseph's connection to the line of David. So, somewhat matter-of-fact, Mary responds, "How can this be? For I am a virgin?" ... How can I give birth to one who will be in the line of my husband-to-be when we have not yet *known* each other?

Gabriel responds. How can this be? "The Holy Spirit will come upon you; this child will be called the Son of God." And to offer a sign of confirmation, Gabriel notes, "Your relative Elizabeth, even 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."

Mary offers a final word of confirmation before Gabriel leaves, acknowledging she has received this message. She says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Paradox is when contradicting things exist in the same space at the same time.<sup>ii</sup>

We are so often told, especially within our own faith tradition, that we have to believe in the absolutes. We are told if we have enough faith, God will always give us exactly what we ask for. We like to hold on to the claim that when someone dies, “it was God’s timing.” In our searching for the light that comes at Christmas, we like to minimize, dismiss, or rationalize the brokenness. We’re not comfortable allowing the promise of hope and the reality of pain to co-exist. Even with this Christmas narrative: we like to think this whole Christmas story is a peaceful, calm entrance for Christ. We like to claim the silence of that first night, as if Mary’s birth story isn’t a messy, painful, or complicated story.

But there’s power in the paradox. That’s the promise of Advent. The Advent paradox says we don’t have to be ok, to be ok. ... We don’t have to be ok, to be ok. ... Can you say that with me? We don’t have to be ok, to be ok.

See, Mary wasn’t ok. This isn’t a fairytale, it’s the messy reality of human life. God didn’t send Jesus into the theater, God sent Jesus as an incarnate being – to live our life, to share in our reality. The invitation of Gabriel – no, the *promise* of Gabriel – was not ok for Mary. It was fearful. It was frightening. It could have meant the loss of her marriage. It could have meant the abandonment by her family. It could have meant, according to cultural laws at the time, that she could have been stoned to death for having conceived outside of her marriage.

Mary wasn’t ok, and that was ok. Mary’s not jumping up and down in grateful praise – she’s wrestling with the reality of this announcement. And in that moment of uncertainty, into her fear, God was present. Fear and assurance, simultaneously existent. It was a paradox of promise – the not yet fully realized, but angelic guarantee, that God would be present in this child.

Pastor Kathy Escobar offers, “Peace doesn’t mean the absence of noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still have calm in your heart.”<sup>iii</sup>

Back in January, perhaps on the first Sunday of the year, I quoted the wisdom of Charles Hatcher, as he offered, jokingly at the time, “2020 is going to be a year of great vision.” ... 20 – 20 ... If only we knew just how eye opening a year it would be. In many ways, this year has done little more than wear us out and test our capacity to endure. It has seemed as if each month, if not each week, brought about new and prescient challenges. I mean, of course there’s COVID, but we had murder hornets this year.

But, for as challenging a year as it has been, Charles was not wrong. 2020 has been a year of great vision. It has been a year that has paradoxically challenged us, and changed us. Though COVID shut us down, though we have spent a large portion of this year behind closed doors, we’ve seen rather clearly in ways we have not previously been willing, or able to see. The paradox of our existence has been in full display.

2020 has shown that no matter how strong the economy may seem, the reality of poverty is devastating our nation. Though we might have our first Black-Asian Female Vice-President Elect, racism

and sexism are still rampant. Though capitalism may allow for great wealth to be offered in philanthropic ways, it is used widely to subjugate the poor for the betterment of the rich. Though the death toll is climbing at a catastrophic rate, our medical community continues to put themselves in harm's way to work miracles of healing. Though white supremacists march with torches and guns, a global movement of multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-gendered, multi-generational gatherings took to the streets to proclaim and demand truth, love, peace, and justice.

The paradox of promise is that even in the darkness, there is a light. Even in our brokenness, there is healing. Even in our weariness, there is rest. Even in our mourning, there is comfort. Even in our being done with it all, there is a promise of a new day, of a new dawn, of light to overcome the darkness. It is the reason Christmas sits on the Winter Solstice – because the promise of tomorrow is that there will be more light than today ... and more light the day after that ... and more light the day after that. God comes to us, God is present with us, God promises us this gift of Christ, so that in the middle of life's ugliness, we can claim the assurance of extreme healing. It doesn't mean that the hurt will just dissipate away, it means that in the midst of the hurt, God is with us. His name shall be Emmanuel, God with us. This is Advent, and it promises us the gift of light in the midst of our weary world.

For the glory of God, may we claim the paradox, may we give voice to the broken, lament the pain, mourn the loss, and still hold on to the guarantee that God's love enfolds us, that the light – however dimly shining – will continue to shine, until all of God's created rejoice in the eternal light that is the fullness of the Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jan Richardson. *The Luminous Darkness*. December 2015. <http://adventdoor.com>. Retrieved November 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Kathy Escobar. *A Weary World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020..

<sup>iii</sup> Kathy Escobar.