

Extraordinary Ordinary

Luke 1:46–55; Micah 5:2–5a

Can you imagine the scene of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary? Perhaps you envision this divine messenger manifesting as a dazzling flash of lightning or a pillar of fire. Maybe Gabriel resembles one of the angels depicted in the banners behind the pulpit. However, the Gospel of Luke gives no physical description. Movies and art, not the biblical text, shape our visions of angels.

Luke uses surprisingly commonplace language to describe the actions of the angel: God "sent" Gabriel, and the angel then "enters in" the room. Ho-hum. Yet, a closer look at these Greek words is revealing. "Sent" shares the same root as the word apostle, referring to someone sent for a holy mission. "Enter in" is also used in the Bible in a metaphorical sense, as entering in to a new experience or a new thought like a revelation. Perhaps we don't require the dazzling burst of light or divine voice from on high. Perhaps what is seemingly ordinary turns out to reveal what is extraordinary.

One of my favorite poems by Wendell Berry describes a vision of a dead friend who makes a sudden appearance.¹ Berry, as the speaker of the poem, asks his buddy, "How you been?" The man grins and looks at him. "I been eating peaches off some mighty fine trees." Can you imagine peaches in heaven?

I shared this poem on Friday at the graveside service for a young father who died of cancer. I also read scripture, of course. However, I just had a feeling about the appropriateness of this poem, given what I had learned about this small family from eastern North Carolina. After I read the poem, the mother and father burst out laughing, then wept openly. The father told me that, in the last weeks of their adult son's life, he had only wanted peaches to eat.

While I still imagine what it would be like to receive a visit from an angel or a message from God, my experience teaches me that divine messages are the little feelings of being nudged. A thought that enters in...

This morning, I also want to preach that some divine messages are meant to challenge, not comfort. Perhaps this makes us uncomfortable. I know that Western Christian tradition has imbued Mary's personality with various characteristics, which, akin to our portrayal of angels, stem from cultural conditioning. Mary has

¹ Wendell Berry, ["A Meeting"](#)

become pure, modest, and meek. This presentation has little to do with the biblical Mary's song, which is clear that God overturns the tables of respectable society and the powers that be.

The Mighty One has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Later in this service, we will sing a paraphrase of Mary's song: "My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn." With Mary, I believe in God's mighty redemption.

Yet, I underline that this is divine might, not human. Columnist David French observes that many of us see the fallacy that might makes right, but American Christians are still susceptible to believing that *right* makes *might*—possession of the truth excuses the actions of the powerful, even their cruelty.² We say Jesus is the reason for the season, but forget the reasons that Jesus lived, namely, to practice nonviolent compassion, not establish nation states.

Through Mary's example, I likewise believe that God works through so-called ordinary people and commonplace events. Once again quoting Mary's song: "The world is about to turn." And we are the most Christlike when we turn toward, not away from, each other, for perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Let me shift to our second scripture reading to continue this point. I can't help but think of a certain Christmas hymn when Micah foretold the importance of that little town in Bethlehem. I've known the song since I was a child. Rev. Phillips Brooks wrote it for a children's Sunday School class.

This preacher came to a big steeple church in Philadelphia a few years before the start of the Civil War. He made a name for himself by preaching against the evils of slavery and contradicting the false theology of white supremacy. Brooks even preached the eulogy for President Lincoln.³ He characterized the slain president's character as showing "the greatness of real goodness and the goodness of real greatness."

² David French, ["Why Are So Many Christians So Cruel?"](#)

³ [Phillips Brooks Address as President Lincoln Lay in State in Philadelphia 23 April 1865 : Mary Katherine May : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

The union of the mental and moral into a life of admirable simplicity is what we admire most in children... When it is present into adulthood, deepened into reliability and maturity, it is that glorified childlikeness, that high and revered simplicity that is chosen by God to fulfill holy purposes.

Those are beautiful words about Lincoln. Brooks was also a gifted leader in his day who was “chosen by God to fulfill holy purposes.” He went on to a storied career in Boston where he preached to more presidents as well as world leaders.

Yet, I wonder if, on the other side of the veil, he’s most pleased by the “revered simplicity” of his children’s song: “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so, God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.” These quiet blessings call for our attention. Perhaps they do not shine like flashes of light or thunderous prophetic songs, but are the shimmers of grace and whispers of faith in everyday tasks, even the ones we’d rather avoid.

This week, I would have loved to avoid the post office. But my sister-in-law is “great with child” and not taking a plane, car, or donkey from New Jersey to North Carolina this Christmas, understandably so! I had to mail her gift along with presents for my brother and nephew. So, I found myself at the back of an interminable line of people who were not in the Christmas spirit.

A dark-skinned woman worked the counter. I heard her thick accent as she patiently and professionally explained package weight and priority mail. Though she may have been from India, this postal worker still called to mind the holy family of long ago in the Middle East. I didn’t know her faith, save that she helped every single person, including those who spoke only Spanish, a young mother with a fussy baby strapped to her chest, and even a dog, who placed his large paws on the counter. The postal worker gave that dog a rub behind his enormous ears! After I was assisted with a smile, I left the post office, wondering if that woman was an angel, a person of admirable simplicity that had deepened into reliability and maturity that glorified childlikeness. The greatness of real goodness and the goodness of real greatness. She was like Mary in that Mary was like us. She is like Jesus in that Jesus is like us.

The world turns. The longest night of the winter solstice ends at dawn. The sun rises and shines over churches and cemeteries, hospitals and post offices. Long ago, the Roman Emperor wanted a census and thought nothing of displacing everyone or interrupting their lives. Life today is often noisy, crowded, inconvenient, wearisome, and yet, everyone’s in it together. It’s as political now as

it was then, and God is here with us. Just imagine! We can be alive to the possibility that this holy child of Bethlehem "casts out our sin and *enters in.*"

Remember the beginning of this sermon? How I said that the simple words "enter in" can also describe a thought or experience that enters our mind as a revelation?! Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today."

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