

December 6, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. ²⁷ He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!"

²⁹ Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. ³¹ You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, ³³ and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. ³⁷ For there is nothing that God cannot do."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸ This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately. ²⁰ While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. ²¹ She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus—because he will save his people from their sins."

²² Now all this happened in order to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, ²³ "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means, "God is with us").

²⁴ So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to.

Message: Angels and Dreams

According to Canada Post,
if you're planning on sending Christmas cards this year,
you'll need to get them in the mail the week ending December 18
to arrive in time for Christmas Day.

Christmas cards are a wonderful tradition, dating back to the 1840's,
but they do require some advance planning and preparation,
and maybe some stretching exercises for your writing hand,

to get it limbered up and ready to work!
 Ironically, the inventor of Christmas cards came up with them
 because he was too popular and too busy
 to keep up with writing letters to all his friends...
 ...sending a pre-printed card was a big time-saver for him.

Right from the beginning though, Christmas cards have been little works of art:
 perfect starlit nights with flocks of sheep and shepherds below,
 detailed nativity and manger scenes,
 fancy-looking wisemen with their camels,
 trekking across the desert;
 the gorgeous Christmas trees,
 the families by the fire,
 the winter landscapes,
 complete with horse-and-sleigh.

And of course, angels.
 Christmas card-makers tend to dig out
 the glitter and the gold-foil for angels!
 According to Hallmark, their most popular card ever
 featured three little girl angels with gold hair and halos,
 published in 1976.

Angels are a very important part of the Christmas story...
 ...although I suspect that – as cute as child-sized angels are –
 the angelic messengers in the Gospels
 did not look like sweet little girls.
 They were the advance party,
 tasked with preparing the way
 for heaven to come down to earth
 at Christmas.

Throughout Scripture, when God used angels to deliver messages,
 it was because something big was about to happen.
 When God really wants to make a point,
 expect angels to make it;
 when someone needs a good hard poke in the faith
 to get things moving,
 when it's too important to risk
 any confusion or error...
 ...the angel of the Lord
 is sent in.

The fact that the message comes by means of angels
changes the nature of the message itself:
it becomes a word made more certain and significant;
it is news of the impossible about to happen.

But we mustn't get too caught up in contemplating angels,
as distracting and extraordinary as they are.
Because angels, although they enhance the message,
are still mere couriers;
they're the delivery service.
It's the message itself that really counts.

The angel gives Mary and Joseph some insight into who this child will be.
Mary is told her baby will be the Son of the Most High,
a king of David's line who will establish an unending kingdom.
Joseph is told that the baby's name is to be Jesus,
which meant to deliver or rescue in Hebrew,
because he'd save people from their sins.

That's it; that's all the angel tells them.
The Son of God is becoming human
so that humans can be saved and brought into a new kingdom.

Angels must be pretty exceptional messengers,
for such a mysterious pronouncement
to make such an immediate impact
on Joseph and Mary.

The glitter and the gold foil on our Christmas cards,
the descriptions of wings and ferocity in the Bible,
our art and our imaginations must all fall short of reality,
in the same way that looking at a picture of a thundercloud
is nothing like standing in the middle of the storm.

I wonder where Mary was and what she was doing
when the angel came to visit her.
No mention is made of any special circumstances;
so we have to assume it was just another ordinary day
for this ordinary young woman.

It is no small thing to be visited by an angel, to be favoured by God,

especially when you are aware that you probably shouldn't be.
Mary herself cannot believe in this impossible possibility
the angel sets before her.
Me? Why am I favored? How can the Lord be with me?
She's just a girl, a teenager;
she's not the daughter of
a wealthy or well-connected family.
She's just Mary.
The angel then tells her the big news
that she's going to be pregnant with a son,
but not just any son,
the Son of the Most High, no less,
from the lineage of David, the great king of her history.
And her son will establish an unending kingdom.

Somehow, some-way, Mary's mind changes
from "how can this be"
to "let it be with me according to your word."

I wonder what those first few moments of quiet
after the angel disappeared were like...
...what faith it must've taken to go back
to her ordinary day of household work
and carry on,
with this exciting and frightening news
unfolding in her heart and body.

The glitter and gold-foiled brilliance of the angel's message faded,
but the good news,
invisible to the eye,
yet already growing,
was just beginning.

There would be a good deal less glitter and gold
if we were to make a Christmas card of Joseph's encounter
with the angel of the Lord.
Joseph always seems to walk in the shadows
of the Christmas story;
part of the story,
but important because of what he didn't do
rather than because of what he did.

The gospel describes Joseph as a man who always did what was right;

a good and decent person, a law-abiding citizen.
 And he was most likely young,
 just starting out as an independent person;
 Jewish men usually married
 in their late teens or early twenties.
 The laws of their community meant that, because Mary was pregnant,
 he couldn't marry her anymore.
 But Joseph wanted to protect her,
 so he intended to break off their engagement
 as quietly as possible.

A good and decent young man, from a good family,
 and kind to a girl who, by law,
 deserved no kindness or consideration.

But once he had settled on this course of action, that very night, it seems,
 he had a dream.

This is not a scene I've ever seen on a Christmas card;
 and yet, it is just as profound
 as Mary's conversation with her own angel messenger.

The angel tells Joseph to go ahead and marry Mary,
 that the child was from the Holy Spirit,
 and that Joseph was to name him "Jesus."
 Joseph wakes up and makes an about-face;
 scrapping his plan without hesitation.

Not only does he not break it off with Mary, he married her at once;
 and then he named the child Jesus,
 effectively adopting him as his own son,
 making Jesus part of the line of kings that included David.

Joseph is no wishy-washy person;
 he makes plans and acts on them.
 But when the call to change direction comes,
 Joseph speaks not one word of question or objection.
 He simply acts directly and immediately,
 and does to the letter
 what the angel tells him to do.

What extraordinary events have intruded
 into the lives of these two ordinary young people.

Certainly, their lives have not been made immediately easier
by the messages the angels delivered.
In fact, the angels have rather made a mess of things
for Mary and Joseph.

And yet, it's kind of fitting, in a way.
Life is rarely Christmas-card perfect;
it's often messy, difficult, painful and sometimes just hard and ugly.
But that's the world, the lives,
that Jesus comes into:
ordinary, anxious, complicated and hurting.
A biblical scholar sums up the story of Jesus' earthly beginnings really well.
He wrote that Jesus came as pure gift, holy surprise,
a fresh act of God, a new genesis,
a new creation.
Jesus is God's power among us,
ready to transform us and lead us
in ways that we can't even imagine.

And that is certainly what's happened for Mary and Joseph.
Had the angel not come to visit her that day,
we would never have even known Mary's name.
This ordinary girl would have lived her whole life,
happily invisible to the lasting gaze of history.

Instead, she is favoured – greatly blessed – by God.
And yet, even Jesus himself makes it clear later on:
Mary is not blessed because she is his mother.
Mary is blessed because,
when confronted with even the possibility of Jesus,
she embraced that gift,
that fresh and holy act
of God sending his Son into the world.

Mary was greatly blessed because she heard God's Word,
and she believed.
And she was the first of us to experience
one of the most world-shaking changes
brought about by Christmas:
she was the first person to experience Emmanuel;
God-with-us in Christ;
the first to move from the absence of God,

to the presence of God,
to the fulfillment of the promises of God.
Greatly blessed, indeed.

Joseph – a good man who follows the rule and does the right thing –
ought to have felt shaken up when what he understood
as the righteous thing to do
was directly challenged
by an angel-delivered message from God,
instructing him to act precisely opposite
to what the law and tradition demanded.

But the moment Joseph knew what God wanted him to do,
he did it.

In Joseph, we meet someone who risks
becoming disobedient in the eyes of the world
– becoming an outcast to his family and community –
for the sake of doing what God asks him to.

And this isn't a one-off; again and again,
God relies on Joseph,
a man with the capacity and the commitment to act,
to keep Jesus safe when he's a child.

This new beginning, this new thing that God is doing...
...Joseph cleared the way,
knocking aside obstacles of culture and convention
to give Mary and their son Jesus
the safe home and protective husband and earthly father
the two of them needed.

At this point in the Christmas story,
Jesus is just barely coming in the world.
But he's already making huge changes in the first two lives he touches:
his mom and dad.

For all that they have become larger-than-life, extraordinary figures
in our Christian history,
what made them so essential
was nothing unique or special just to them.

Mary heard God's Word,
heard his promises for a new kind of king and a new kind of kingdom...

...and she believed.
 Joseph heard God's Word,
 recognised the call, the purpose and direction
 that it was offering him...
 ...and he acted.

That's it; nothing miraculous or extraordinary there at all.
 They believed and they acted.
 Nothing any one of us couldn't do.

There are a lot of things we can't do this Advent and Christmas season.
 That is simply the reality of our messy, complicated, broken world this year.
 Those beautiful Christmas card scenes
 of big gatherings and busy shopping malls,
 carolers raising their voices in song,
 and families crowded together around a table,
 all the events and activities
 with which we usually
 fill our Decembers...
 ...we have to wait
 until next year.
 But what we can do is use that unwanted extra time and space
 to prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus
 even more deeply into our lives and into our communities.

Like we said last Sunday, Christ is coming and the darkness is going;
 we only have to believe and act, inviting Jesus in,
 to give him the space he needs in our lives
 to come and start putting things right;
 to be the gift, the surprise, the newness,
 that every one of us needs.

Jesus' parents helped God prepare the way
 for Jesus' first advent into the world,
 and it changed them:
 heart and mind,
 their actions and their futures.
 In Mary and Joseph, these two ordinary young people,
 we find an extraordinary example,
 showing us how to prepare for Jesus' coming:
 with faith and belief,
 with commitment and action;
 and with a readiness to meet

God's power among us,
which will transform us and lead us
in ways we can't even imagine
Thanks be to God.
Amen.