

Genesis 18: 9-14
Psalm 89: 1-4
Luke 1: 26-38
John 1: 6-14

Impossible Grace
December 24, 2017
Mary R. Brownlow

Christmas Eve is the most logical time to talk about angels, isn't it? Luke's Gospel features angels prominently: they bring important news to various people, like Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds watching their flocks by night. The word "angel" literally means "messenger," and they always seem to be bringing good messages, good news, and glad tidings. In the 5th century, artists starting depicting these messengers with wings....though there is no such biblical description of Gabriel or other angels. Probably ancient peoples were too smart to believe that a human body could fly if you just tacked on some feathered wings. That's physically impossible. For all we know, Gabriel was a wizened old man, or a little girl, who was able to speak for God. Nevertheless, Christmas Eve is a good time to talk about angels... maybe we just need to get rid of a lot of preconceptions and focus on the message of the messengers. As John Dominic Crossan says, "Think of angels as ultimate meanings radiantly personified." Ultimate meanings....and I might add, impossible grace.

So, while I am blowing up the angels with wings image, I might as well throw this out there: theologically speaking, Christians could probably get by just fine without celebrating Christmas. Really, the birth story was a footnote to the Gospel of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. We don't *need* a doctrine of the virgin birth to get those ultimate meanings across, we don't *need* a story about a manger (which by the way, only shows up in Luke's Gospel). We certainly don't *need* presents, or gatherings of family and friends, to be Christian on the 25th of December. But we cannot get along without stories of hope, stories that tell us that there is more to human life than we can imagine; without ultimate meanings and a rebirth of wonder.

This gets me thinking about messages and words: about how many words there are out there. When you think of all the books and newspapers and radio and TV and internet and podcasts and texting and twittering – words are flying thick and fast, filling up space. But many of them are empty words: not really worth anyone speaking or hearing, here today and gone tomorrow. Our attentions spans are getting shorter. All those words do not have much content or food for thought, certainly not much wonder.

By contrast, a few words - spoken in a tent by someone who *seems* to be a messenger from the Lord to Abraham, one of 3 men who stopped by the tent for dinner - a few words caused disbelief, wonder, and laughter. The messenger did this by announcing impossible grace, new life, new opportunity, something that would transform history for generations. Sarah and Abraham would have a son, because "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" These words had the power to help people work and wait for God's transforming moment. The Jewish people carried them through the years, a sign of hope, yearning for the security and unity and new life that was promised. Mary of Nazareth carried these words within her, and so was able to hear the messenger who came to her when Gabriel said, "Nothing will be impossible with God." And the church has

carried them ever since the nativity, as a sign that God *does* work through the old, the young, the poor, the small, and the insignificant to do great things.

Later, when the Gospel writer John wanted to write about the coming of Jesus into the world, he did not talk about Mary, or angels, or mangers. He talked about the messenger named John the Baptist, another bearer of ultimate meanings. John testifies to the True Light, which he also calls the Word, with a capital W. A Light was coming into the world to enlighten us, and it was an embodied, fleshly Word, glorious, full of grace and truth. And the church has carried these words ever since, as a sign that, in spite of all that works against grace and truth, someone has come to change us and make us – and everyone - children of God.

We have to admit that it can be hard to keep this radiant message of ultimate meaning in the forefront of our minds when the world is dark, full of conflict and despair. We tend to focus on messages with a darker future predicted. There are so many novels and films that show an apocalyptic or dystopian future – and this is especially true of young adult fiction. If we fill our minds with those stories, who would ever have children...what would be the point? If we fill our minds with those stories, we will believe that God has forgotten us, and that impossible grace is just plain impossible, and that wonder is dead and cannot be revived.

We have to admit that it can be hard to keep this beautiful message from the messengers of our tradition in the forefront of our minds when we live in a time when beauty and grace have been degraded to sexual attractiveness and celebrity. When we think of “beautiful people” we often think of the rich and the glamorous. We often think of practices of unhealthy consumption and personally destructive relationships...not to mention a lack of care for the environment and the unfamiliar stranger. We have narrowed our definitions to exclude truth, wonder, and impossible grace. We have narrowed our stories to a point where we have no future.

The artist Makoto Fujimura wrote, “What is the five-hundred-year question?” and answered himself, “Well, it’s a long-term, historical look at the reality of our cultures that asks, What ideas, what art, what vision in our current culture has the capacity to affect humanity for more than five hundred years? ... If our decisions matter and make ripple effects in the world, then should we not weigh what we say and do in light of the five-hundred-year question?” And he writes that this question is, “the opposite of the Warholian ‘fifteen minutes of fame. It’s also a question I raise to my teenagers, whose culture celebrates immediate gratification, also seeking after ‘fifteen minutes of fame.’”

In to this world, into our culture, come the messengers and the message that came to Sarah, that came to Mary, that came through John: something is about to be born that will express the love that pours from the heart of God. How will you respond? You can laugh, like Sarah: you can laugh so long and so hard that you eventually name your baby Isaac, which means “laughter.” And generations later people will laugh with you. You can sing, like Mary, who bursts into the powerful poetry of the Magnificat as soon as she meets her cousin Elizabeth. And generations later, people will sing with you. You can make beautiful metaphors, like John, about word and light, grace and truth. And generations later, people will cling to these words to light their personal darkness. All I know is that the message of impossible grace needs each person’s most compelling expression to radiantly express, in their person, the ultimate meanings given to us.

As a church, we need to take the long view of bringing hope to birth, just as Sarah and Mary did. We need to think generationally and generatively. Are we able to model for young people what hope looks like in difficult days, what compassion looks like in the face of suffering, what acceptance looks like in a world of belittlement, what respect looks like in a culture of sexual harassment? Can we be creative enough to catch the attention of a generation who is overwhelmed by information? Can we convey our awe of impossible grace, whenever it shows up in our lives? What will your testimony look like? Only by investing our spiritual energy in convincing actions can we proclaim our hope in the future, our trust that the next generation will live lives of vision and possibility. By this spiritual and practical investment we become fertile with tomorrow.

And every time someone speaks out in defense of the lowly, the hungry, the downtrodden; every time someone challenges the proud and the powerful to do what is right, something new is birthed again. We are given insight into the beauty and power of God, into God's long-range pattern. We are given an opportunity to stitch ourselves into God's tapestry. These words become a matter of life and death.

Mary was poor, young, insignificant. If she can carry the word, we can. Sarah was older, thrust, perhaps unprepared, into a new role. If she can believe the word, we can.

Advent is a time of waiting, but Christmas is almost here. We keep carrying the words we have learned because we are still waiting for transformation. We laugh with Sarah, we rejoice with Mary, but we are still waiting to be conformed to God's pattern to be stitched into God's tapestry. After all this time, is there something new we can say or do to make those words real? In the crowded cosmos of billions of empty words spilling into print and into cyberspace, can we find the important word, the weighty word that will bring new life to our hearts, our families, our communities, our nation, our world? Can we rediscover wonder? Only if we hear and internalize, then embody the words of these women will we find our way.

Maybe, like Gabriel with Mary, we can begin with a simple greeting. Gabriel greeted with words of grace: "Greetings, favored one. God is with you." I believe that those words had power, and perhaps should be shared more often. Do you want to try it? "Greetings, favored ones! God is with you." You can use it again at the passing of the peace, if you want. We can celebrate God's surprising favor shown to all who are in need, including ourselves. We can wonder at God's mercy and justice. We can assert that we are part of the process God uses to make that mercy and justice physical real, and palpable.

Hear the Good News: we are all pregnant with prophecy, all full of holy potential. Listen to Sarah laugh and Mary sing. Let them fill you with awe and wonder. They are our messengers. They can show us the way. Amen.