

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 6, 2009 Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 26-38

Christmas Messengers: Mary and Gabriel

Today is the second in a four-part sermon series on Christmas Messengers. We are looking at stories within the Christmas story, which contain angel appearances. A little review from last week:

Angels appear all through out the Bible, both Old and New Testament; and especially it seems in the stories of the events around Jesus' birth.

We also learned that angels in the Bible are NOT the same as the angels of Hallmark cards, popular TV and Movies; there are no guardian angels in the Bible. Angels are, by definition, messengers of God.

When God is going to do something big, He dispatches angels to tell us. Angels, we also noted, always bring Good News.

Last week the angel Gabriel brought good news to Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were old and without any children, that they would have a son. And their son was to be John the Baptist who would prepare the world for the coming of Jesus.

Today we'll look at Gabriel's appearance to Mary; next week we'll talk about the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, and lastly we'll talk about the angels coming to the shepherds the night Jesus was born.

So today – Mary and Gabriel. The name Gabriel means “Strength of God,” and he shows up in the Old Testament book of Daniel, as well as in Luke. Muslims believe that Gabriel dictated the Koran to Mohammed. For Christians, though, he is most important because of this passage today.

This story is called the “Annunciation” because Gabriel “announces” something. His first words to Mary are, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” This is the basis of the Rosary Prayer: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

The Annunciation is very important to Roman Catholics and is celebrated on March 25th actually. Why? It's 9 months before Jesus is born.

While last week, Zechariah was terrified when the angel appeared to him, this week Mary is perplexed, and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. After all, it's not every day that an angel comes with a message.

And Gabriel when he greets her says what angels commonly say when they appear to humans: Don't be afraid! It really makes me wonder what they look like and sound like that the first thing they need to say is, "Don't be afraid"!

I wonder if Gabriel said this because he knew what he was about to say to her and that she'd need to be assured BEFORE he delivered his message. Because, frankly, this is frightening news.

You're going to have a baby and you'll name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the most high. God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will never end. (v. 31-32)

Mary's response seems a little subdued, "How will this be?" We read it with calm formality in church, but maybe she really screamed this at him. Part of me hopes she did! And then Gabriel obliges her and gives an explanation – "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and power of the most high will overshadow you. The child will be holy, the Son of God." (v. 35)

And then he gives more information about God's plan, which has already begun in fact. He tells her that her cousin Elizabeth is already pregnant (last week's story). If God can cause an old barren woman to conceive, he can also cause a young virgin to conceive. And then that great verse – one which can be lifted out of context and still speak truth, but which is even more powerful here – NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD. (v. 37)

And Mary's sublime response, "Here I am, servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word." (v. 38)

God has a plan for the world, and God has a plan for us. And they are both related. And angels are messengers of this plan. The angel announces the plan, but still Mary had to say "Yes" to it. If she hadn't who knows how it all would have gone. Or maybe God chose Mary because he knew she'd say yes...

Thankfully, Mary does say yes; and not only yes, but she was eager to be part of God's plan.

The angel announces a plan for the salvation of humanity and Mary wants to be part of it. Wow! Can you imagine that happening to you? Especially if you're a teenage girl?

A couple of months later, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and not surprising for two women pregnant for the first time, they share joy beyond measure. They are caught up in joy and together rejoice at what God has done in their lives.

And what do people do in the Bible when they're overjoyed? Same as what some of us do.... They sing! Last week we heard Zechariah's song after this son was born. And this week we have Mary's song as she and Elizabeth share this tender moment together.

And like last week, the hymn after the sermon will be based on this song. It is traditionally called "The Magnificat," since the first thing she says, is "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

And so, our Christmas Messengers this week are Gabriel (again), and Mary.

And their message? This week, it's a simple one. There are more complicated pondering on this passage – about Mary – what it means that she is Jesus' mother.... But those will have to wait for another year. Today we need a simple, straightforward message from God, and this is it:

The angel Gabriel says, to Mary and to us:

Don't be afraid

You are favored, loved, blessed by God

God will do great things in, with and for you.

And with God NOTHING is impossible.

And Mary says to us:

When God comes to you, even with a frightening task, say YES!

And you will have joy.

This is indeed Good News – the kind of good news that can only come from our God.
Amen.