

The Second Baptist **Pulpit**

“We Praise with Hope”

Luke 1:26-38

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Dr. Brent Beasley

Second Baptist Church
4680 Walnut Grove Road
Memphis, Tennessee 38117
(901) 682-3395
www.2ndmemphis.org

For some reason, I find preaching sermons about Christmas to be difficult. I think it might be because we know the Christmas story so well. It seems almost impossible to dig down under the layers of familiarity and tradition and get at the impact of the story.

I want to try, though, to take a step back from the story, and try to hear what it is saying to us.

When we take a step back from this story today that we call the

Annunciation, this moment when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to make the announcement of Christ’s impending birth—when we take a step back, there are a couple of important things we learn about the way God works and acts in the world.

The first is that God came to Mary in the form of an actual event, not just an idea or a concept. Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th century, used to emphasize the fact that

in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the mode of God's coming to people was always in the form of events rather than in static images.

What I'm saying is that in some religions, you try to think your way conceptually into the presence of God. But in the Christian religion, God always acts his way concretely into our presence through events in history.

That's how it was with Mary. Mary didn't come up with this idea of the birth of the savior in her own mind. The angel Gabriel broke in from the outside, from beyond, and encountered Mary. God happened to her in the form of an event—an actual occurrence—and that's always the way it happens in the Bible.

This is the way we find God, this is the way that God works and acts: not just by vague or abstract or even interesting ideas but by the concrete things that happen in history.

The second thing we learn from this story about the way God works and acts is that God's action often takes the form of a surprise.

Reading this account of the angel Gabriel and Mary reminds

me that God seems to be in the business of giving people babies who have no business having babies.

I think about, in the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah. You remember Sarah as an old woman, after a lifetime in the desert, her face cracked and rutted like the parched ground beneath her feet.

And she's laughing because she's ninety years old and has just been told by an angel she's going to have a baby. Long ago, God had promised her husband Abraham that he was going to be the father of a great nation. And now, childless and ninety years old, Sarah had given up hope of ever seeing that promise kept.

But an angel came and said, *You're going to have a baby.* And to this old couple, as they laughed in disbelief—as they laughed at the idea of the two of them at their age signing up for Lamaze classes, as they laughed at the idea of having to call up the insurance people and find out if Medicare covers childbirth—as they laughed at the surprise of it all, the angel said, *Is anything to wonderful for God?* Surprise.

And then, right here in the first chapter of Luke, an angel appears this time to Zechariah to tell him that he and Elizabeth, even though they were getting up in years and had never been able to have kids, that he and Elizabeth were going to have a boy.

His name would be John. He would be called John the Baptist.

God almost always catches us by surprise at first.

And then speaking of surprising babies born to unlikely folks, look at Mary. Not the one lovingly painted by great artists or carefully chiseled by Michelangelo or colorfully crafted into stained glass.

Look at the real little girl of 14 or 15 from a nowhere village in Galilee. A town of only a few dozen families. Poor. Dirt poor. Had to walk four miles to another town for market. Nazareth wasn't on the way to anywhere special. Neither was Mary.

And it was to no-good Nazareth and nothing-special Mary that the angel Gabriel was sent by God. He came to her and he said, *Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.*

She was totally shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, *Do not be afraid, Mary.* Angels are always saying that when they show up, *Fear not. Don't be afraid.* It's as if they know they are fearful creatures. Or maybe they know that when an angel shows up, it's like hearing the boss or the principal wants to see you in the office right away. You figure it can't be good news.

But it is good news. The angel says to Mary, *God has a surprise for you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. He will be great, be called 'Son of the Most High.'* *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever—no end, ever, to his kingdom.*

Mary said to the angel, *But how? I've never slept with a man.*

The angel answered, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God.*

Surprise!

After the angel Gabriel announced all this to Mary, he

reminded her about Elizabeth. He said, *And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, as old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! For nothing will be impossible with God.*

Like I said, one of the things we learn in this story about the way God acts and works is that God's action often takes the form of a surprise. God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts.

God's ways almost always catch me by surprise at first. It's usually only as things unfold, and most often only in retrospect, that it begins to dawn on me and I begin to see with wonder what God has actually been up to all along.

The workings of God are always good but rarely obvious. Sometimes things that at first seem terribly bad have a way of flowing into good. And sometimes things that seem so good at first don't turn out that way.

Here God came to Mary with this outlandish and surprising proposal: You're going to have a child without a husband. Mary learned, if she hadn't already, that the God of the Bible is the God of the unexpected.

He comes in the form of events and in the form of surprises.

Here's a good rule of thumb, I think. If you're wondering about something in your life being the will of God, and it's not what you would have expected, look carefully at it, because the element of surprise might well be the very signature of God upon it.

God comes to us in the form of actual events, not just ideas, and the ways God comes to us are often a surprise.

[thanks to John Claypool for expressing these two ideas in "I Second the Motion," Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, December 15, 1968]

The other important question, the important thing we learn from this story is not about God's action but about Mary's response. What was Mary's response to God's surprising action? What did she say?

Who could have blamed Mary for saying "no," by the way? And do you think God would have forced a child on an unwilling young girl? I don't think so. Mary could have said "no."

I've thought some this week about Mary's ability to make a decision for herself here, Mary's

freedom. It is true that the angel *announced* the impending birth and didn't *ask* Mary for her assent, but there is a choice for Mary, *whether to say yes to it or no, whether to take hold of the unknown life the angel held out to her or whether to defend herself against it however she could.*

We have a similar choice in our own lives, Barbara Brown Taylor says: *Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or no, I will not.* You can say no to your life, Taylor says, *but you can rest assured that no angels will trouble you ever again.* [*“Mothers of God,” Gospel Medicine*]

Frederick Buechner wrote about the moment: *[Mary] struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child . . . he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.* [*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who, p. 39*]

And Mary's answer?

She uttered those powerful words: *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*

Mary is not a victim here. She's not being dominated here against her will. She doesn't lose her voice; she finds it: *Here am I*, she says.

I think all of us here are familiar enough with parliamentary procedure to know that at least two people have to agree on a motion before anything can happen. So you have to have a motion and a second. A motion without a second will die, and a second without a motion is impossible.

Now, I've just tried to make the point that it is God's nature to act, to step in and propose. It is our role to choose to recognize, to consent, to collaborate with God.

Louis Evely describes this in a wonderful way by saying: *God made the motion; Mary responded perfectly by saying: “I second the motion. Let it be with me as you have said.”*

When Mary responded to God's surprising initiative the way she did, Mary seconded God's motion.

If God's work is going to be done, God has to make the motion; it originates with God. Mary couldn't have conceived a son all by herself. The Spirit of God has to overshadow us (the same words used in the first chapter of Genesis), just like it did at the beginning of creation and just like the Spirit did over the empty womb of Mary, if any real life is to occur. The Spirit of God has to act.

But here's the crucial thing, *we* have to second the motion.

How many of God's motions have died for lack of a second?

The great preacher John Claypool talks about this in one of his sermons. He asks, *Why are there wars and mining accidents and slums and poverty and epidemics? Is it because God doesn't care? Or is it because God has made a motion again and again and again that could have helped, and it has died for lack of a human second—for a lack of someone like Mary to stand up and say "yes" and allow God's work to be done?*

Being the one to second God's motion is not always easy. Have you ever really thought about what Mary went through? It certainly was not easy for her. Unmarried. Pregnant. And no matter how much faith she or

anyone else close to her might have had, she cannot avoid the scandal of that.

Mary bore the indignity of seeing her waistline swell for the first five months or so of her marriage. People could tell time even back then. They could count back to when she got married. She went off to visit her cousin for a while, giving some relief from the whispers.

Then they found out they were going to have to go to Bethlehem for the census. How about nine months pregnant and a ninety-mile journey riding a donkey over rough terrain?

It's not always easy to be the one to second God's motion.

But God's motion hangs in the air even now. Have you ever been in a meeting where someone makes a motion and it waits for a second and it waits and waits, and there is no response? God's motion hangs in the air, and God waits, and our hurting and broken world waits, for someone to stand up and reply to God's motion. God waits and our world waits for one of us to second the motion.

A hungry child in a poverty-stricken part of town prayed very hard at Christmas time for some food and some toys. But nothing happened. She related

this to a cynical friend who said, *What happened to this God of yours? Why didn't he answer you?*

To which the child answered, *Oh, I'm sure he did and told someone to bring me a Christmas gift, but I guess they just forgot.*

[Claypool, "I Second the Motion"]

There's more than just childish faith in that response. It may just get at the heart of the problem—not with God who makes the motion but with us, who forget so easily and fail to say like Mary, *Yes, yes, I second the motion. Let it be to me according to your word.*

I'll close with this from one of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, who talks about the opportunity offered Mary and us by this ancient, familiar Christmas text:

You can decide to take part in a plan you did not choose, doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you do not entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body.

Or not.

This time of advent is a time of waiting and watching and preparing, and it is also a time of praise. You and I can offer the greatest words of praise imaginable, and that is: *Yes, yes. Let it be with me according to your word.*

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Memphis, TN 38117-2599