

Advent Series: The Four Stories of Christmas
Part I: Hope for the World
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2018

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. -- Luke 1:26-38, NIV

Today we begin a new sermon series for Advent called *The Four Love Stories of Christmas*. Now when it comes to Christmas "love stories" -- we may first think of something we might see this time of year on the Hallmark channel. Around our house those Hallmark Christmas movies are often a refreshing change to the bad news and chaos found on many of the other channels. Now I have to admit that these movies often do not have the most complex story lines. Actually, for most of the movies the plot is pretty much the same. So, here is the "spoiler alert" if you want to close your ears to what happens in almost every movie:

In a small town they are celebrating Christmas, when either a stranger, or someone who grew up there but has moved away to success in the big city, arrives. When the person comes to town, he or she rediscovers the real meaning of Christmas and life. Also, they usually fall in love with someone local and the two live happily ever after. That's it! And while that may be the story line that comes to mind when we hear the words "Christmas Love Story" -- that is *not* exactly what happens in these four stories from Luke's gospel we plan to look at this Advent. However, I think our "Four Love Stories of Christmas" are actually much more complex, deeper, and relevant to our lives today and to our world.

Luke begins this first love story about the angel Gabriel telling Mary that she will have a child in a unique and miraculous way. And, Luke begins it by grounding the story in place and time. This story is not told by Luke as a mythical fairy tale that happened "once upon a time." No, Luke gives very specific details of time, place, and person. It takes place when Mary's cousin Elizabeth is in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Luke begins with that because, in the verses prior to this, he has just told of the unexpected pregnancy of Elizabeth when she thought she was

too old to have a child. We may also remember that Elizabeth's child will be John the Baptist – the one who will “prepare the way” for the coming of Jesus.

Luke goes on to name a specific angel, Gabriel, who brings this message to Mary. Gabriel had also been the one to tell Elizabeth she was going to have an unexpected baby. Luke then tells where this happened – Nazareth in Galilee – probably because it was such an out-of-the-way town that many would not know exactly where it was. He then names Mary, who is engaged to Joseph -- a descendant of David. Luke is telling this as historical narrative – not as myth, so he grounds it in time and place with the names of everyone involved.

Over the years some have questioned whether the story of Jesus' birth was a myth, like some of the myths in literature in which the gods interacted in unusual ways with humans. But, as C.S. Lewis, one of the foremost literary scholars of his day has reminded us, the gospels are not written in the form of a myth, but as true, historical accounts meant to convince the reader that it really happened and is really true. Lewis put it this way: “Now as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are, they are not myths. I have read and written a great deal of myths, and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing.”

Over the years, artists have tried to imagine what this story of this encounter might have looked like. Many times, the artist would paint the story, but place it in his or her own contemporary setting. For example, here are just a few of the paintings depicting this encounter. (Various versions of “The Annunciation” shown here.) This first one shows Gabriel on the left with multi-colored wings that look like a bird's. The arches make the scene look European – which is the historical context of the painter. Both the angel and Mary bow toward each other while the angel is holding a lily – a symbol used by the church, not only for Easter, but also for this encounter. The white petals symbolize the purity of the virgin Mary. This is a more contemporary painting that sets the encounter in a garden. And in this one, the angel is represented not as a being, but simply as a column of brilliant, yellow-white light. In this painting, Mary is pictured as a young girl who is herself painting a picture of a lily. Her back is to the angel who also holds a lily as he enters this space through light blue curtains.

The last one I want to show you is actually in the collection of the High Museum of Art in midtown Atlanta. It is not presently on display, but I went down there anyway this week and tried to get someone to show me the painting, even though it wasn't on display. And I can tell you that doesn't work! But this painting is more vertical and darker, with Gabriel coming down from above. Mary seems to be reading a book. Again, it is set in the time period of the artist. Each of these may help us to imagine what this encounter was like.

However, when Luke tells this story, he not only sets it in particular time and place, he also records some amazing dialogue – which could only have been passed along by Mary because she was the only human present. The angel Gabriel begins by announcing that Mary is “favored by” God, and that God is with her. Mary is obviously troubled by the visitation of an angel, as anyone would be. Mary is troubled here, first of all, simply by the appearance of the angel, even before she has heard most of what the angel tells her. The angel tells her not to be afraid -- which is what most angels who appear in the Bible seem to say. Whatever angels look like, their mere

appearance would probably terrify most of us. Gabriel reiterates that Mary has found favor with God, but more importantly, that she will give birth to a Son to be named Jesus

Now, I have preached on this passage for a number of years by now in my ministry, but this week something jumped out at me that I don't remember seeing before. It has to do with what Gabriel tells Mary about who this child Jesus will be:

- He will be great
- The son of the Most High (God)
- Give him the throne of his father David (King David)
- Reign over Jacob's descendants (the people of Israel)
- His kingdom will have no end
- The holy one
- The son of God

Mary, being a good Jewish girl who had been taught what we Christians now call "The Old Testament", would know that these were all different ways of describing only one person – the Messiah sent by God to save not only Israel, but the whole world. Her child was going to be the Messiah! This is not just a story about the miracle of a child being born to Mary who was engaged, but had not yet married, and had yet to be intimate with Joseph – as complex and difficult as that might be by itself. No, this is first of all about Mary giving birth to the child who will be the Messiah sent by God to save the world!

Now, Mary does ask how this will take place because she knows how these things work. Gabriel explains that it will be the miraculous work of God's Holy Spirit that will cause this to happen. Note that the Greek words used here do not lend themselves to describing some kind of divine/human physical encounter found in some mythical stories. The Greek words simply mean that God's Holy Spirit will be present with her causing this to happen -- and nothing beyond that.

Then comes the rather curious way in which Gabriel tells Mary about her cousin Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy that God has also brought about. We may guess why – maybe Mary will later think she has imagined this whole encounter with the angel, but if she goes to check it out with Elizabeth, (which she does) then she will believe that it is really true. But, more about that story in the weeks to come.

Finally, after hearing all of this, Mary says those amazing words: "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1:38, NIV) Mary's words indicate that she has a choice in this matter. Gabriel did not say to her, "This is what God is going to do, whether you like it or not." No, Mary clearly believes that she has a choice, and she chooses to say "yes." She will agree to what God plans to do.

We have called this sermon series "The Four Love Stories of Christmas." So, if this is a love story, then *where do you see the love in this story?* Between whom do you find love? While this may not be the normal, romantic love story -- I think that if we look closely, we will see that this story is *filled* with love!

First of all, it begins with *God's love for the world*. As John's gospel reminds us, that God so loves the world, that He sent His only son Jesus, that whoever believes in him will be saved." (John 3:16) This story has its roots in the very beginning, when God created a plan to deal with the brokenness, sin, and evil in our world. This story begins with God's love for the whole world.

Next, I think we see *God's love for Mary*. Gabriel tells Mary twice she is "favored" by God, and that God is with her. God cares for Mary -- enough to give her a choice in this whole plan. I believe she could have said, "No" -- but she did not. God loved Mary.

I think we also see *the love of Gabriel for Mary* -- particularly in the way he spoke to her. Gabriel does all he can to relieve her fear and anxiety in telling her news that would be hard for anyone to hear. He tells her she is favored, that God is with her, and not to be afraid. Gabriel expresses love and care for Mary.

I also think we see *Mary's love for God*. Not only does she ask her questions about what God is doing in a humble, respectful way -- in spite of this being way outside of her or anyone's life experience, but she ends up by saying "yes." She will do what God is requesting. She will do her part to fulfill God's plan for her. . . and for the world.

I think that implied in all of this is *Mary's love for Jesus* who is yet to be born. If you know the story of the life of Jesus and how it affected Mary, it will not be easy raising this child born in this most unusual -- and to some, socially-unacceptable way. And while Mary probably hasn't even thought about this yet, but how exactly do you raise and parent the Son of God and the savior of the world?

Finally, to bring it full circle, I think *Mary also, like God, shows her love for the world*. This story is more than just about Mary's situation. When she heard from the angel Gabriel who this child was going to be -- she knew that this is a once-in-history event that is at the heart of God's plan to redeem the whole world -- and everyone who has been and will ever be born -- forever! This is not just about her -- this is about the whole world. So, when Mary agreed, she was demonstrating a love for her whole world. There is love all throughout this story!

I wonder what it was like for the angel Gabriel, as he told Mary all of this and waited for Mary's response? Author and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner recreates that moment in this way:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said. As he said it, 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. ("Gabriel" for *Peculiar Treasures* by Frederick Buechner)

The whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl! Isn't it amazing how God works? God takes normal, everyday people like Mary – and like you and me – and asks us to be part of God's plan to change our world.

I want to show one last artist's interpretation of this encounter. It is different from the previous paintings in that you do not see the angel. You only see a young Jewish woman looking off as if she is contemplating what is being asked of her. I want to invite you to think of this image as you consider this question: *What is God asking you to do to bring hope to your world?*

I believe that, like Mary, God wants to do something through each one of us to make a difference in our world – to do some thing or many things that only we can do because of who we are, our gifts, our talents, our resources, and our life experiences. *What is God asking you to do to bring hope to your world?* And, how will you respond? Friends, I believe the future of at least a part of your world may hang on your answer.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.