Christmas in July Mary

Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-20

Buckingham Church

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1. Annunciation

(Go up to a person and say “Pretend I am an angel” then) “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!”

So, first, how do you think you would feel if a being you discerned could be an angel showed up in your room?

Now how do you think you might feel if that angel said that you are “favored” by God and that God is with you? Wouldn’t that make you happy, like you won the lottery?

But now imagine you are maybe a 13 year old girl, and that angel has just given you a really good reason to be afraid.

Quite frankly, I think Mary of Nazareth was one of the bravest people in all the stories of the Bible. To be so young, so inexperienced in the world and to be so poised as to ask questions of an angel in her midst…no wonder God chose her.

One of my favorite reflections on this story comes from the late Frederick Buechner, who wrote this in his book *Peculiar Treasures*. (p. 39)

“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.”

But ah, Mr. Buechner, there was no “just a girl” about Mary of Nazareth. Thanks be to God.

1. Birth

Quirinius. That’s how you pronounce it, so repeat after me, Quirinius. Governor of Syria. Ever heard of him? Me neither, except for in Luke’s gospel, but he did indeed exist. He was the legate commissioner of Augustus Caesar in the first decade of the first century. Augustus reigned from 27 BCE to 14 CE.

Who cares who was the Emperor, and who was the governor of Syria when Jesus was born, in a small city far away from both of them and entirely off their radar screen? Well, Luke wants us to know that this really happened to real people in a specific time and place. It’s not a myth that is timeless but is meant to be understood as God entering into the human world in a specific way, place, and time. The birth was real, too, and really hard, as most births are. For Mary, there was no anesthesia or sterilized hospital room. The baby had no lovely nursery, but the tight quarters at the Inn meant that she had to use an animal’s feeding trough for a crib. And forget about “no crying he makes.” I am sure baby Jesus wailed like any baby when he was wet or hungry or just needed to be held.

The point is, God squeezed all the God-ness of God into that tiny body and lived among us in a very hard time in a very hard place to grow up, the time of Roman soldiers and the struggle of those on the margins just to stay alive. God has always come in the specificity of the now, the struggle and joy of the moment, the hard times and the good, and always will.

1. Angels and Shepherds

In 1992, I was privileged to travel to the Middle East with a group of staff and volunteers from the UCC. We visited our mission partners in Turkey, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. Outside of the city of Bethlehem, in the village of Beit Sahour where, tradition has it, the shepherds stood in their fields that night, we met with their descendants. These were Palestinian Christians, some of whose family roots in the region date back as far as anyone could date back.

Among many other wonderful conversations that night, I got an answer to one of my oldest questions about this Christmas story. Why did the angels go to the shepherds in the fields? Why not to the religious leaders, or to the King, or to the weavers or bakers or builders? Is it because Jesus was born in the middle of the night, and the shepherds in lambing season were the only ones awake?

Oh no, our new friends assured us. The reason that God sent the angel choir to the shepherds is that shepherds of Bethlehem have always been famous for being the worst gossips in the region! Never tell a shepherd in Bethlehem a secret, our friends assured us, because if you do, it won’t be secret for more than an hour after you have told it! God wanted to make sure this good news of great joy got out into the world posthaste, so to the shepherds the angels went.

Thank God for that wisdom. I was imagining what would happen today if that kind of message came to someone. They might put it out on social media, where immediately the doubting trolls would shout them down and the conspiracy theorists would invent reasons why this was not good news but probably fake news. Memes would mock the original posters and who knows what would happen after that.

Thank God for the gossiping shepherds, who told Mary everything they had experienced, leaving her to ponder, and then went out walking and leaping and glorifying and praising God, unafraid of the naysayers.

By the time Jesus grew up and began preaching 30 years later, most of those shepherds had probably died. Their lives were difficult, and lifespans were short. But they had plowed the ground for Jesus, surely telling the tale to their children and neighbors and anyone who would listen. Yes, many who heard probably doubted or laughed at the silly shepherds, saying they must have been drinking. Like some of those later on Pentecost when the disciples told a similarly unbelievable story of Resurrection.

But some believed. I met their descendants that night in Beit Sahour. They told me that we here in the United States are the descendants of those shepherds, too, and are also charged with having the ridiculous joy and courage of those Bethlehem shepherds. Go, tell it on the mountain. Over the hills, and everywhere. And not just in December; perhaps especially not just in December when the message gets all clouded with tinsel and advertising. Tell it in July. God came. God comes. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Here are we, like Mary, the servants of the Lord. It’s a story worth living all year long. Amen.