

"Gabriel's Story"
Sermon for Christmas Eve
Texts: Luke 1:5-13, 18-20, 26-38; 2:21; Matthew 1:20-25
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"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news." That's what I said to Zechariah when I appeared to him in the sanctuary while he was carrying out his priestly duties. I have to admit that I scared the wits out of him. That's not an unusual thing to happen when we angels appear to human beings. They tend to become frightened rather easily. That's why we have to go around saying "Fear not" all the time. But scaring Zechariah was not what I did wrong. Where I messed up was in losing my temper at him. You would think an angel would know better, but we're not perfect. Only God is.

I got mad at Zechariah because he wouldn't believe what I was trying to tell him. You see, Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, and they were good people, really good people as a matter of fact. They were righteous and blameless before the Lord. That's about as good as it gets. They had no children, though, because Elizabeth couldn't get pregnant. They had long since given up hope of having kids, because they were very old.

God sent me to Zechariah to tell him that he and Elizabeth were, after all this time, going to have a baby and that he would grow up to be John the Baptist who would have the great privilege of announcing the coming of the Messiah and of baptizing him. Pretty cool, huh? But Zechariah doubted what I was telling him. He had the audacity to ask

me, "How will I know that this is so?" Yes, I admit I took it personally. It was like he was saying to me, "How can I believe you? How do I know I can trust you? What makes you so special?"

"I'm an angel, Buddy," I said to him in essence. "I'm Gabriel, one of the top four angels in rank, second only to Michael [*Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 326]. Have you seen that on anyone else's resume recently. I know what I'm talking about. Why? Read my lips now . . . *God sent me*. So how dare you question what I've said to you. I'll tell you what, Zechariah. Because you've been speaking when you should have been listening, I'm going to take away your ability to talk altogether until after the baby is born and you've named him John. How do like them apples? Maybe you'll be a little more attentive the next time an angel is trying to tell you something important."

So I lost my temper, which is not something angels are supposed to do. We are just supposed to be messengers, nothing more. "God is not going to like this," I thought to myself. "When I report in from all these assignments I've been given, God is not going to give me a very good evaluation. My job performance score may not be too great. I'll probably be sitting on the bench for the rest of the millennium."

But I couldn't think about that right then. I had places to go and people to see. My next stop was Nazareth. I was to give some very special instructions to Joseph concerning his fiancée, Mary. I was to tell Joseph that he must not be afraid to go ahead and marry her, even though Mary had already become pregnant. Since Joseph wasn't the father, he had planned to break off the engagement without causing Mary any undue embarrassment. Joseph was a righteous dude. It was

my job to convince him that the baby was God's son, the Messiah, and that Joseph was to have the unique opportunity to raise this special child as his own.

Remembering the unfortunate situation with Zechariah, I didn't take any chances with Joseph. I appeared to him in a dream. That way he couldn't argue with me, and I couldn't become angry with him. Besides, if you haven't figured this out on your own already, I'll let you in on a little secret we angels know. It's one of the tricks of the trade. It's almost always better to speak to guys in their dreams, when they are unconscious. They stand a better chance of doing what you want them to that way, because when they wake up they what? You've got it. *They think it's their idea.*

Okay, I confess that I really didn't do that much better of a job with Joseph than I had with Zechariah. I took the chicken's way out. I played it safe, but it probably wasn't fair. I'm sure Joseph had some legitimate questions for me. God was asking a lot of Joseph, and I didn't give the poor man even an opportunity to raise his concerns. This will be another strike against me with God. "Boy, am I going to get a bad grade on this task. I may be taken off active duty and put on waivers. I even could get my wings clipped for this. I've got to get my act together and do the rest of my assignment right," I thought to myself.

The next part of my job was, in some ways, the most difficult. And of course I botched it up a little bit too, but I'll get to that in a minute. I have to tell you that it's tough being an angel. Speaking to people on behalf of God is not exactly a piece of cake. What I had to do next actually was to go back in time a few months. We angels can do that, just

like we can make people stop talking. Wouldn't you like to be able to do that on occasion? Anyway, I was to visit Mary, the young girl who was to be the mother of the Messiah. I was supposed to give her the good news that she would bear God's son, the One who would grow up to be the savior of the world.

I was determined not to repeat my earlier mistakes. I wouldn't lose my temper like I had with Zechariah, and I wouldn't underfunction like I had with Joseph. I decided not to appear to Mary in a dream. This time I would be more open and up front. After all, you can deal more honestly and directly with women. We angels understand that. I tried to be as positive as possible with Mary. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you," I began. But right away, Mary started asking difficult questions. She was perplexed, confused. I couldn't blame her. I would have felt the same way if I had been in her place.

She wasn't like Zechariah, though. She didn't have doubts. She just wanted to know what her role in the baby's birth was going to be. And so I told her, "Well, Mary, you don't have anything to be concerned about. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son. This son will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. And that's not all. Your son, the one you will give birth to, he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. How does that sound?"

But there was one little problem. Mary knew her biology, and so she was still rather confused. She realized that there was a piece of the puzzle missing. "How can this be," she asked me, "since I am a virgin?"

She had me there, and I knew it. I had painted myself into a corner. I looked at her, with her eyes so eager to trust yet so full of concern, and I couldn't help myself. I forgot who I was in that moment, and I overlooked Rule Number One in the *Handbook for Angels*, "Never under any circumstances attempt to explain to a human being *how* the things of God will occur."

"Well, Mary," I stammered. "It will happen something like this: The Holy Spirit will . . . in some way . . . come upon you, and . . . let's see how I can put this . . . the power of the Most High will sort of . . . overshadow you. Okay? And for this reason the child born to you will be holy. Yeah, that's it. He will be like his heavenly Parent. Your baby will be like God."

Then I thought of a parallel situation that might help to explain things. "You know, Mary, your cousin, Elizabeth, she's pregnant right now, and everyone thought she was way too old to have children. But here she is in her sixth month and doing real well with the baby. No problems at all. The bottom line is this: *Nothing is impossible with God.* If God wants something to happen, nothing can keep it from happening."

"Would she buy it?" I wondered. Would this explanation satisfy her? Would she, God forbid, ask me anything else? I've already suggested way too much," I thought to myself.

But Mary said the most wonderful thing at that point. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." According to *my* word. She believed me! She trusted me! She had faith, incredible faith, in what I was telling her. I was ecstatic. And I was humbled by the depth of her reliance on the goodness of God. How rare

it is to see such pure willingness to be obedient to God's will.

So I left Mary to return to heaven. As full of joy as I was in my experience with her, though, I couldn't help but be more than a little concerned about how God was going to rate my performance. I had overfunctioned with Mary, and there was no doubt about that. I had overstepped my bounds. I had tried to explain things way too much. That's not an angel's job. There wouldn't be any end of the year bonus for me, and no extra vacation days as a reward. I would be lucky if I still had a job when I got back to the pearly gates.

As soon as I checked in, God sent for me. "Here it comes," I said to myself. "It's judgment day. I'm on the path to wrath; it's my turn to burn." But to my great surprise, God didn't want to scold me at all. He didn't even bring up all the things I had done wrong with Zechariah, with Joseph, and with Mary. It was like he had forgotten about my mistakes. He dropped them like third period French. In the end God didn't hold my poor performance against me. All was forgiven.

Instead he gave me the best news an angel could possibly receive. He had taken my suggestion, the one about the baby I had made to him earlier. God had listened to me and had decided to do what I had proposed. And so I wound up getting to do the one thing that no angel before me or after me could have the privilege of doing. *I got to name the baby.* Check it out for yourself. It's in Luke 2:21: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given *by the angel* before he was conceived in the womb." Did you hear that? *Jesus, the name given by the angel.* That's me, Gabriel, and that's the name for the baby I had suggested to God. Jesus. Jesus.

What a special name it would become, the name that would be above every name. It's the name that ultimately would bring glory to God in the highest and peace on earth. It's in that name through which all people would have an opportunity to find their salvation. *And I got to give the baby that name.*

What a great God! How good God is. And I thought I was going to be in trouble and that God was going to be angry with me. Instead, in the name of the baby Jesus, God showed me just how much he cares for me, appreciates me, values me, trusts me, and depends on me. Come to think of it, isn't that what Jesus is all about? Isn't that what he was born for? Isn't that what the very name of Jesus has come to represent? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."