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Sermon of December 21, 2008 Dr. Jim Standiford

Give Pause for Christmas: “Mercy, A Baby!”

Luke 1:26-38 Luke 1:46b-55

*Come, Lord Jesus, fill our minds with your word,
fill our hearts with your love, and fill our lives with your
light.
Come, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

I invite you to think with me about these two passages of scripture, both from the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. Luke is quite the writer. He gives us two birth stories each preceded by an announcement story. Yet, the chief character in these events is God. God here is the God of grace and power. Grace fills the story because God is sending a gift for the world, into the world. The entire point of these accounts comes to a focus in v. 37, “*With God nothing is impossible.*” This is the great affirmation that we celebrate at Christmas.

The announcement of John the Baptist’s birth comes as an answer to fervent prayer. The announcement of Jesus’ birth is completely unanticipated. John is born to parents well past the age of child bearing. Jesus is born to a virgin. What we come to understand is that God is working through very diverse but ordinary people. The angel does not come to a queen or a princess but to a young girl engaged to a carpenter, in an insignificant town, (certainly not “Israel’s Finest City”) in an unimportant province of the Roman Empire.

This young woman, Mary, is engaged but not yet married. The angel’s news comes to her as a total surprise and shock. Mary was greatly troubled. *Tobit*, which is included in the apocrypha, was a popular folk tale of the time. It tells of a jealous angel who appeared on a bride’s wedding night each time she married and killed her bridegroom. With such stories in the air, the fear of a betrothed girl at the appearance of an angel is all the more understandable. Additionally, it is most likely that Mary hasn’t yet even paused to think of a baby. It is just too early. If she were to be pregnant now she could be stoned

to death. So, she asks, "How can this be?"

If this story is all about God, we have to ask the question: How foolish is God? First, God gives us humans choice, free will. How foolish is that? The oral history of the human race in Genesis answers that question pretty quickly, in chapter three to be exact. Adam and Eve, our representative parents, no more than meet, then they commit the first sin, and it's a big one and it still resounds through all of us yet today.

Second, how foolish is God then to choose us as the foundation of the Kingdom? We are mortal, fickle, unfaithful, sinful, and easily distracted. All too often in the noise of our lives we give God the deaf ear. Yet, God keeps trying. God sends the patriarchs, the law, the judges, and the prophets. Yet, we continue in our willful ways.

Third, how foolish is God for God then comes to us. God comes to us as a baby: Mercy, A baby! Of all the ways for the Creator of all that is, to come! A baby!

Sometimes when we have an experience we can't really put into words, we sing. Mary listens well, knows God's voice, and is obedient to God's call; so she sings. Luke presents Mary's song modeled on Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2. Generations before Mary, Hannah, well along in years, repeatedly prays for a son. When her pray is answered she sings God's praises. The story so parallels John the Baptist's parents that some scholars have suggested this was Elizabeth's song not Mary's. After all the family story of the Hebrew people, going back to Sarah, was that old, sometimes very old, barren women would finally be blessed by God and have a son, and they would sing praise to God. However, here a young virgin sings the song. The tradition is interrupted, the old is new and the familiar is unfamiliar. God is doing a new thing. Mary sees God blessing her in spite of the fact she is a handmaiden of low estate, a nobody. Yet God is doing so much more. God blesses not just one poor woman but all poor, oppressed and hungry in eschatological reversal. God brings down the proud, rich, oppressors and exalts those who have been "diss-ed," disfranchised, disregarded, dismissed. These who have never heard good news in their lives are told a baby will be born for them. Mercy, A baby!

How foolish is it that God did not come as a powerful king, military leader, great landowner, or charismatic politician? If he wanted to change the world, these are the kinds of people that usually get their way. There are many answers but perhaps at the heart of the matter is heart. God is love and to express love God comes to the world as we all do, dependant, and needing love as well as offering it, just like everyone else. We learn to love him and he loves us. This one who comes as a baby will never grow into a king, military leader, wealthy landowner, or politician. He is no great success model. However, he spends his whole life showing the love of God as he feeds, heals, includes, and loves everyone he meets. This embodiment of love shows all of us what love looks like to all those we have chosen not to love. This is the great reversal of which Mary sings. For Jesus there are no "us" or "them" but all are loved. By his example he draws us to love as he loves.

Luke, in anticipating the birth of two children is linking all the joy, wonder, and thankfulness in the birth of a child with God's saving action. Joy is peaked in waiting. Love is disclosed in tenderness and promise. Every birth then can be a sign of salvation, of finding favor, of being blessed, of living with promise.

Each new child is God's "Yes" vote for the human family.

Perhaps the bigger and more important question for us to be asking, is not how foolish is God, but how foolish are we if we do not receive God? God comes to us as a baby for just like in every baby there is a gift in the present being; there is also promise, potential, and possibility for the years to come. Such is also the case every time we say yes to God. When we say yes to God, a birth of new baby or infant, possibilities can take place in us no matter our age. If God comes to us in heart, then shouldn't we respond in heart? Our spiritual life can be changed so we personally experience God in deeper and more loving ways. Heart, compassion, seeking the best for others, becomes the way we relate to all others, especially those who suffer or are excluded. We can change our home environment, relationships at work can be enhanced, a new positive dynamic can enter our neighborhood, or we seek new work or a new volunteering opportunity because of our change of heart. Giving birth means creating a new context for life. Further, there is always a risk in bringing new life into the world, whether what is born is an infant being or an infant endeavor. However, the God we know and worship is a life-giving God. God takes a risk giving us life and we live and take a risk with God.

Sharon Bowles, my colleague in leading the Christian Believer class, introduced us Wednesday night to a children's musical (really an Epiphany musical based on the wise men). It is entitled, "The Late Great Potentate." In the musical one of the characters breaks the gift he is bring to the baby Jesus. This character wails, "How can I give a broken gift?" In truth, all we have to offer Jesus is our broken selves. Then a song begins, "*You are the gift, you are the gift, you are just what he's been waiting for, not gold or shining jewels, you are the gift that he's been longing for. I brought my gift to give to him, but all he did was touch my hand, don't you see, all I need to bring is me.*" I think the play has it right, all we need to bring to Christ is ourselves.

Mercy, A baby! A baby born to give us faith, and a faith born in us to give us new life. How foolish are we if we do not receive God? The word "Mercy" is from the Old French "Merci," meaning thank you. So we say, "Thank you! A baby!" The clearest way we say "Thank you" is to offer ourselves to that baby that his love and life might also be born in us. Will you do that right now? Will you offer your heart, for the love of Jesus to be born anew in you? Let us do so in silent prayer.

(Time for silent response)

Mercy! Thank you! A Baby!

Amen.

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