

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NASHVILLE**  
**DR. TODD B. JONES**  
**3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT**  
**DECEMBER 16, 2018**

***Angels We Have Heard on High: Gabriel and Mary***

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

LUKE 1:26-38

During Advent we are paying attention to the angels of God who play a role in the life of this Christmas story, the greatest story the world has to tell. Angels mean messengers, and when angels appear in the scriptures, they proclaim God's word. Today we come to one of the best known, and most loved, passages involving angels in the Bible, when the angel Gabriel, who we met last week when he came to the priest Zechariah in his old age, announcing that he and Elizabeth would have a child. The angel Gabriel comes now to Mary, who could not be more different from Elizabeth. Mary, who is betrothed or engaged to Joseph, and is a young woman, not yet his wife. Mary, Luke goes to great lengths to tell us, is a virgin.

Gabriel appears four different times in the Bible. Twice in the book of Daniel, in chapter 8 and chapter 9, he is introduced as "the man Gabriel," as "one having the appearance of a man," and yet we are told that he "takes flight." Probably this is why, when artists have depicted angels, they always have wings. In both appearances, Gabriel comes and announces the word of the Lord to the prophet Daniel. Then Gabriel appears twice in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The name Gabriel, not incidentally, means "the strength of God." Angels appear throughout the scriptures of Israel, and the Greek word for "angel" means simply "messenger."

Karl Barth is arguably the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, and in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth devotes almost three hundred pages to the subject of angels. I love this one sentence that Barth comes to, when he says, "Where God is, there the angels of God are. Where there are no angels, there is no God." John Calvin also had a compelling conviction about angels. He said, "The angels are dispensers of the Divine goodness toward us. They regard our safety, they undertake our defense, they direct our ways, and they exercise a constant solicitude that no evil would befall us." John Milton, that poet and preacher from England, who was one of the Christian faith's great storytellers, thought angels were everywhere, all the time. Milton wrote, "Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth unseen, both when we sleep and when we are awake."

But no angel is better known to us than the angel Gabriel. Gabriel appears to Mary, and he begins with a greeting. "Hail, O favored one! The Lord is with you," is how it is translated in the King James Version. In the New Revised Standard Version, "Greetings, O favored one." Literally, that word could be translated more accurately: "Rejoice, O favored one. The Lord is with you." The first word of the angel's greeting to Mary, that is translated, "hail" or "greetings," is "chairé," the word for "joy" in the Greek, from the word "chará." It is the same word that the

angels speak to the shepherds on the night that Jesus is born. “Behold I bring you good news of a great joy – chairé – which shalt be to all the people.” Gabriel’s first word is not “shalom,” a Hebrew greeting to Mary, but instead “chairé,” a Greek word for joy, announcing, in a sense, that Jesus is coming, not just for Jews, but for all people everywhere, because Luke’s Gospel is the most universal of them all. Gabriel’s message, as mysterious and puzzling to Mary as it may have been – as it had to be – is first and foremost a message of joy. And for everything else that Christmas is for us in this society that loves Christmas, first and foremost, Christmas is meant to be about joy.

A few years ago, Connie decided that we needed Christmas lights on our front bushes, in addition to Christmas lights on wreaths around the house. So we went into our treasure trove of Christmas lights, many of them purchased to decorate the tree, and we started putting these lights out on the boxwoods in front. I was stretching them out to make them go far and efficiently, and to hasten the process. Connie said, “No, that’s not how you do it! You have to put them closer together.” And by the time we had made her happy with how the front bushes looked, I realized we did not have any Christmas lights left. I said, “Now how are we going to decorate the tree?” She said, “Easy – we’re going to go out and buy more Christmas lights!” So we bought more Christmas lights and we decorated the tree. The next morning we were sitting out on our back porch, and we were drinking coffee, and Connie said, “I think I want to put some Christmas lights on the boxwoods in the backyard as well, so every morning we get to see them.” I said, with a voice, that even to me, sounded like Ebenezer Scrooge, “Why would we do that?!” And she said, “You sound like an old cat! Because Christmas is about joy. And more lights mean more joy!” (I hate it when Connie preaches to me!)

Did you know that there are five hundred forty-two references to joy in the Bible? Joy is hardly peripheral to the Biblical story, it is utterly central to it. Gabriel begins this life-changing, earth-shattering, world-saving word to Mary of the birth of God into the world as a helpless baby with the word “joy” or the word “rejoice.” We will sing it later in this Advent season, but I love the hymn, “Good Christian friends rejoice, with heart and soul and voice, give ye heed to what we say, ‘Jesus Christ is born today!’” Or as Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice!” Gabriel teaches us, first and last, that joy is the Christian’s calling, and that rejoicing over the birth of Jesus into the world makes God happy. Christmas, among many other things, is “good news of a great joy to all the people.”

Secondly note, that Gabriel’s message to Mary begins with the same words that Gabriel’s message to Zechariah did, and that the angel’s message to the shepherds included: “Do not be afraid.” Just as surely as we know that Christmas is a call to joy, it is also a call to banish fear from our lives. For many years, a great saint of God named Richard Halverson, was the Chaplain to the United States Senate, and the Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. Dick Halverson said, “People who fear God face life fearlessly; people who do not fear God end up afraid of everything.” Of all the passions which we can be tempted by, none mar our judgement any more than fear. The more afraid you are, the worse decisions you are sure to make. Halverson thought that if we possessed a proper fear of God, we would not need to be afraid of anything less than God. Which is why the Proverb says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds are all told the same

thing: “Do not be afraid.” Next week the angel who visits Joseph in a dream will say exactly the same word to him as well. I think it is precisely because Gabriel means “the strength of God” that we do not need to be driven or gripped by our fears.

Mary was told by Gabriel that the child’s name was to be Jesus, which means, literally, “God saves.” The angel says, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” In other words, you do not need to be afraid because God is in charge, because God reigns, because God has the final say over your life and mine. I always love the person who composed these words: “Fear knocked at the door; faith answered; no one was at home.” “Do not be afraid.”

A third word from the Lord that comes to us from the angel Gabriel is one of the last things Gabriel says to Mary, “For with God, nothing will be impossible.” This might be my favorite word of all that Gabriel announced on behalf of the Lord God to Mary! This word doubtless echoes the words that Sarah spoke in Genesis 18, when God announces to her, “In your old age you are going to have the promised son.” Sarah asks the question: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” This same word looks forward to a word that Jesus will speak in the eighteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel as well: “What is impossible for mortals,” Jesus said, “is possible for God.” I believe this with all my heart! Do you? “For with God, nothing will be impossible.” It is a promise that is offered in the future tense by the angel Gabriel, which means it is a Biblical promise that covers all of your tomorrows. God is utterly sovereign and free, and God is free to do with the future whatever God wills or wants. Which is why I have always resonated so deeply with P.T. Forsyth’s unforgettable phrase, “I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.”

So hear these three words today, dear friends: “Rejoice! Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” “Do not be afraid.” And third, and best of all, “For with God, nothing will be impossible.” Let the words of the angel be God’s word to you.

AMEN.