

Sermon for December 24, 2017 – 8:45 service
“From Heaven to Nazareth - From Gabriel to Mary”

Luke 1:26-38, 47-55

Gabriel got his orders. They came directly from the Almighty in person. He was to carry a message to earth and personally deliver it. Usually a lower angel would take the message. But this time it was different. The last time Gabriel himself had delivered a message it was to the great prophet Daniel. It was the great prophesy of the 70 weeks of 7 years that revealed God’s plan for all time.

This must be some message and it must be to someone important. The angel Gabriel looked at the address. It was some small town in the backwater province of Galilee called Nazareth. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” he had heard people say.

Who was it he would speak to? A king or prophet traveling through Galilee on their way to some place important? To some common carpenter named Joseph? No, to the girl engaged to Joseph the carpenter, whose name was Mary!

Then Gabriel looked at the message and realized why he and not some other angel of lower rank was commissioned to carry the message. It was a message greater than any he had ever delivered. He chose his words carefully: “Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you.” She certainly was favored. What other young woman would be blessed by an angel of such high rank visiting her? What other person would be so blessed as to give birth to the only begotten Son of God? This Mary would witness the love and grace of God in a depth that no prophet of old had ever known!

Well, I am not sure that is exactly the way it happened, but that’s the way I imagine it. Luke makes it clear that a great chasm was being breached here with Gabriel’s visit to Mary. Usually in the Bible angels are not named. Luke could have said simply, “An angel came to Mary.” But he didn’t. He gives us the name of the angel and what a name it was. Gabriel was one of the more famous angels.

He also identifies the place as a small town in Galilee called Nazareth. If you were to tell someone from another state that you live in Taylors, SC, they would say “Where?” You would say, “I live in a small town outside Greenville, SC called Taylors.” Nazareth was an insignificant town; the Taylors of Galilee.

Even Mary is not named directly. She is called, “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph” then as a footnote, “Whose name was Mary.” She was finally named in a culture that usually only recorded the names of men. She was no princess or queen. You want to know what she was like? Look around at the teen age girls around you. That is what Mary was like.

Yet a great angel, perhaps an archangel, the one who legend said would blow the last trumpet at the end of time, visited her. But it was to announce a much greater visit. God, no mere archangel, but God in the flesh, was coming to Earth! The divine and angelic was manifesting itself to people, but not just the kings and prophets, but to the fiancé of a carpenter; to the people of the small town of Nazareth. In the world of that day, Mary's worth as a person is that she might give birth to future carpenters to carry on the work of their father. But God said, "No, she will give birth to Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth who would carry on the work of his Heavenly Father!" And for the first time in history the name of an angel and the name of a maiden were recorded in Scripture in the same breath!

You see that's what Christmas is all about. The heavenly and divine and angelic coming to us! The only begotten Son of God, the prince of creation, was coming to earth. But not on chariots of fire or clouds of glory. He was coming in the birth of an otherwise unremarkable boy to a family unnoticed by the world.

In Jesus Christ that is the kind of thing God does! The Almighty comes to common everyday people like you and me. God brings the favor and Divine grace to us all. It is no wonder that when she sang of this, Mary said, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant."

In Jesus, God comes to people like you and me. Through the Holy Spirit, grace and love are born anew in our hearts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "It is only because he became like us that we can become like him." (*The Cost of Discipleship*) After her conversation with the angel Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." She submitted herself to God's will as unbelievable as it was. Let us submit ourselves to God and let God's love and grace be born in us this Christmas!

And in the 12th month of the year of our Lord 2017, the Word of God came to a city in the piedmont of SC to a United Methodist church by the name of Aldersgate. "Greetings favored ones. You have been blessed by God. By the power of the Almighty and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the love and grace of God will be born in you. You are called to be an instrument of God's power and might, God's grace and justice in this world."

What will you say? "Who me?" "No, you want the big church down the street or the talented person at the other end of the pew." "Maybe after the New Year, 'cause my calendar is full right now."

Or will you say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word?"