

SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS EVE, DECEMBER 24, 2008

SCRIPTURES: Luke 1:26-38

“Gabriel”

So, before we get into the whole Mary and the annunciation and babies named Jesus thing, I've got couple bones pick about angels in general and me in particular. How is it that people of this faith have taken clear descriptions of angels that are given all over the Bible and distorted them to the point that I have seen depicted for centuries in so many ways and form that are just wrong? I mean, what is it with the wings thing? Is there ever a messenger of God depicted in the Bible with wings? I don't think so! Seraphs? Definitely! Got six of 'em. Cherubim? Sure, although that whole cherubim thing is more a creation of the minds of people trying describe things that are just beyond description; people trying to find ways to grasp, in your humanity those things that are just divine. But angels, messengers that we are, bringing the good news of God to your earthly existence! We don't do wings; never have, never will. We don't need 'em. We can get around very well without and special appendages, thank you very much. God sees to that, just the way God sees to everything.

Now that I've got the wing thing out of the way, we've got to talk about gender a bit. When some of my friends paid a visit to good old Abram, it was guys not women that appeared before him. The angel who spoke with the voice of God out of the burning bush to Moses? Another guy. In fact your Bible pretty much totally ignores gender in nearly all its stories, as it should. Gender is not a heavenly thing. Yet what do I see, from the tops of trees in this season to artwork through the ages? Women! Winged women! Sweet, rosy cheeked, European Caucasian women! Or worse yet, curly headed kids - with wings of course!

So let's this get whole business straight. We messengers of God that you call angels, are, in the Bible and in reality, whatever we need to be to get the job done. If being a woman helps get message across, then we will be glad to wrap ourselves in the female form of humanity. If being male allows our message to be received more comfortably, then we will be glad to be male. In what you folks call the Middle East and in what you determine were Bible times, we were most often male and we were nearly always Palestinian in our look, a look that many of you now equate, unfortunately, as that of a terrorist. In your world we would probably be more likely to look like your grocer or the taxi driver at the airport or maybe the gal behind the mask at your local nail boutique. We've carried messages from God in the past, and still do today, to

unsuspecting souls like yourselves; and yes, some of you may even have entertained some of us unawares. We are seldom what any of you would describe as pretty; we are never, ever cute; and we don't have wings!

So now, since I seem to be on a bit of a roll, let's pop a few more bubbles. That girl Mary that I went to see on a day so long ago in your measuring with such a great message as to change whole world? She was no girl as you might think a girl to be; 'tho by your current standards she was pretty young. Children of both genders in those days had no choice but to mature quickly. And the guy Joseph that she had been promised to? He was surely no old man. Yes, he had a few years on Mary; but in the grand scheme of things the two of them were little different than any other betrothed couple of that age, especially when you consider that a skilled craftsmen like Joe there had to complete his apprenticeship and establish himself a bit before he could afford the payout needed to actually buy a wife that had been promised him. And the whole "Mary was a virgin thing"? Now that just really isn't any of your business now, is it?

Why Mary? Why not? God needed somebody; Mary was handy. She had good family lines for the historians to write about later. There was the Elizabeth angle with Zechariah offering a priestly connection without having to stretch the story too far; giving a fine role to Elizabeth's son John as "kinsman". It was a role that he embraced with fervor to his death; a death that God never wished, by the way. And besides all that Mary had the disposition that God knew would bring her to say, "Behold, I am a handmaid of the Lord." In fact God knew that she had in her everything that was needed to take up the role that that she would carry throughout her life and the life of her most excellent son. Mary celebrated well, mothered well, grieved well and moved on well. Luke wrote well of Mary when he said that she pondered many things in her heart. Mary was a good "ponderer". And she needed to be, for that eldest son of hers, who just happened to carry within him the incarnate nature of God, gave her much to ponder.

So who knows how it fell to me to carry that fateful and glorious message to such a fine young woman? Maybe I had that bit of the collective spirit of God that came in handy on that particular moment in the midst of the timeless eternity that is the existence God. Whatever the concurrence of events that caused the lot to fall to me, I put on the best bit of Nazarene humanity that I could muster, toned it down just a bit so as not to shock the poor woman too much, and went down for the grand presentation. I must say she took it well, as God in God's timeless omnipotence knew she would. She pondered the whole thing deeply and then went out to inform

her husband to be.

Poor Joe had considerably more trouble with whole business than Mary did. After all, he was a pretty concrete guy; no shortage of grey matter, but trained all his life to take raw materials and tool them into something useful. Set a chisel and mallet to wood and it's gonna yield. Smack your thumb with that same mallet that you're using on the chisel and it's gonna hurt like crazy. Cause and effect, that's what Joseph was all about. And the only cause that could bring about Mary's "effect" was one that would lead him to dismiss her as damaged goods; although he was a good enough man to do it quietly.

I'm glad that I wasn't the one assigned to do the talking to Joe, because, I tell you, it took a lot of talking! Getting a man of concrete concepts to move into the realm of the purely spiritual was not easy. Eventually he came around though and joined in the plot, all the while knowing full well that he was never going to be more than supporting cast in final credits. He raised the kid well; treated him as he treated any and all of his children, with the harsh, fierce love that was necessary in that age and that place. He was a good father; until that construction accident took him out of the picture. Oh, didn't you know? That's right. Actually it only made page eleven of section B in the Nazareth times when it happened, even though four workers were killed all told. As I said, supporting cast.

Well, that just about covers it now, doesn't it? Oh yeah, there was the shepherds thing. Yep, that was me too. Old Luke polished it up little bit in his gospel, but he wasn't too far off the mark. You see, God figured that such an important thing as the birth of a Son deserved more than one or two average looking fellas and a chance meeting on the street with folks. So I got fingered again. Who knows, maybe God liked my annunciation work. Whatever reason, I got to round up a whole pile of angelic souls. We dressed ourselves up in bodies and garb that the birth of one who carried the incarnate nature of God required and headed out to the open fields so that we would have a nice backdrop.

I tell you, the sight of me popping into reality from nowhere was tough enough on those poor farmhands (and yes most of them were aliens and foreigners and a few of them were in the country illegally - after all, shepherds are about as low on the totem pole as you go, labor wise). And when we hit them with the full chorus, a couple hundred of us in glistening white robes, I swear three of them plum passed out! It was a good thing I gave out the instructions before the chorus. They never would've heard them afterwards!

Yep, a couple hundred that time, in the form of men and women both; some of us taking on the character of more mature folks and some of us looking quite young. A few even chose to look like little more than kids. It was a real family affair, with most of us carrying a pretty Palestinian look, though there were a few Nubians just because there was one of those among shepherding crew.

And, once and for all, NO WINGS!