

“The First Christmas Gift” – Luke 1:26-38

Well, here we are – Christmas Eve Day. The cookies have been baked and stowed carefully into tins, keeping them safe from prowling eyes and fingers. The pies are also ready, carefully covered in a futile attempt at disguise. Cards have been sent and presents are wrapped. The melodious sounds of Christmas carols are gently wafting through the malls. Even the weather is cooperating – if your definition of ‘cooperating’ includes that virtually every corner of Canada will celebrate a white Christmas!

Ah yes, we’re finally only a few hours away from what is for most of us the sweetest time of the Christian year – Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. To be sure there are many for whom this is the bleakest time of year, fraught with memories that only come out when dragged along with the Christmas decorations, and we acknowledge their experiences and memories and pain. Still, at the heart of the Christmas story is the birth of a baby in Bethlehem so many years ago and the tender love and grace of God represented in that birth.

It has taken us a while to get to this moment, and we have savoured the journey through the prophetic predictions that lead up to this incredible moment of God’s glory and grace in action. And here, as we stand but a few days away, it is a most appropriate moment to savour also the occasion when a young woman was notified that she would bring to the world the first Christmas gift. What a moment that must have been for her!

However, that we may fully appreciate and savour that moment we have to step back a bit. We have such a powerful history of celebrating this event that it has become totally obscured; our celebrations have become so ritualized and driven into such a deep rut of predictability that I’m not sure we can still hear the wondrous story. As soon as we hear the familiar opening words, “and the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth ...” we automatically conjure up a picture of a young Jewish girl, in a small town, dressed in a robe with a hood and wearing sandals, confronted by an angel. We cannot help but hear the swelling sound of music wrapping around that angel’s first “Ave Maria” (even if – to be scripturally accurate – the angel didn’t speak Latin and didn’t even use Mary’s name in his greeting).

We need to refresh our understanding of the particularity of that momentous occasion, because doing so affirms that the location and the people involved fulfilled those prophetic predictions. However, there is a danger in seeing only the specific particulars of that event, namely that in doing so we often tend to see it as a “long, long ago in a far, far away land, involving them” kind of event, instead of a “right here, right now, involving us” kind of event.

One way for us to avoid falling into the trap of seeing this event in that same old “over there, involving them” way is to recast the story into a more familiar setting, to a place we can understand and with people to whom we can relate. Several scenes come to mind depicting how a young woman in different parts of today’s world might react to the appearance of an angel bearing such astounding news. A tidy apartment in Korea, where a young girl responds to this startling news with a nervous shake of the head and a quiet, embarrassed giggle. A small town in rural Argentina, where a young woman tosses her long black hair as a challenge to this most upsetting news, firing off a melodic burst of Spanish demanding to know, “how can this be?!” A mud hut in Nigeria, where a young girl reacts to the news with wide staring eyes, wondering how long this infant will live, and how will she ever find food for him. Or perhaps a huge West Van home, where the heavenly messenger is confused by the valley girl “speak to the hand!” rebuff. Possibly we might visualize the scene centering on a black girl in the downtown eastside for whom the angel Gabriel is also black, with a more contemporary message ... instead of the

classic “hail, favored one” he catches her attention with the vernacular, “Yo, Momma”, an expression with an undercurrent of fertility and childbirth. We might even see in our mind’s eye this drama played out in a log cabin set among the black spruce between an angel and a First Nations young woman. Can you see how seeing this wondrous event in different ethnic settings helps us to come a little closer, to feel a little more involved, to understand the closeness of this event with our own lives?

As we contemplate the news of this first Christmas gift, perhaps we can even imagine the mixed emotions and thoughts that must have been running through Mary’s head: “A baby! I’m going to have a baby!”; “But I’m not married – how am I ever going to explain this?! Who will ever believe me?!” We need to somehow recapture the emotion of this wondrous moment, the roller-coaster ride from surprise, into fear, through disbelief, around chaos and turmoil and finally into acceptance.

Now note that Mary’s initial response was anything but an unmoved “whatever!” to the news. I suspect we may even have some scriptural evidence that Mary was a redhead, for who else would so quickly challenge even the angel Gabriel with the question, “how can this be?!” Nevertheless, Mary’s ultimate response was positive and powerful. She reacted with deep faith not just to this angelic announcement but throughout her lifetime, standing by her child not only at his birth but also at his death on the cross. We acknowledge with grateful thanks her faith, and that her response was “let it be with me according to your word”, setting into motion the divine event we celebrate some two thousand years later.

We are blessed in that we know how this story turned out, with prophecy fulfilled in the birth of the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, a child acknowledged even in infancy as the Son of God. A child who grew into the man Jesus who rocked his contemporaries and the whole world with the message of God’s unbounded love and grace and acceptance of people, including and perhaps especially sinners. An infant child who became the risen Christ, exemplifying the power and grace of God, grace shown in his birth, his life, his death, his rising again bringing new life to all who would place their faith in him.

But we jump ahead too quickly. I want to draw you back to the beginning of this story and hear once again Mary’s response to the announcement of a gift of new life. I wonder if she somehow knew that this first Christmas gift of a new life to her was in fact a gift of new life to the world. I’d like to think that she somehow knew, or at least sensed, because she responded so powerfully to that announcement and to that call from God. Indeed, her response was surprising and somewhat unexpected, if only because it makes no sense. Her acceptance of the call to such a challenging task was irrational, illogical, totally faith-inspired. And because of her response, many are motivated to make a similar response even today.

To demonstrate that people are making similar responses, I simply invite you to look around you. Seated around you are dozens of examples of the same kind of response. Elders, who after their initial “how can this be?” reaction when called into God’s service responded – and continue to respond – with “let it be with me according to your word”. Faithful friends who have served on various Committees, offering their time and talents in response to a call. People who follow their “how can this be?” with “OK” when asked to help lead the service as a liturgist. Others who nervously step forward in response to a call to greet guests arriving for the service of worship. Our congregation is made up of people who in one way or another have responded to a call to action from God, and who offer themselves in service in the kingdom, whether it’s cooking or serving breakfast, or mopping floors, or through financial support, or singing in the choir, or leading the choir, or teaching Sunday School, or working with International Students, or

showing up late at night for a bread run, or running the sound system, or working in the office, or responding to the security people at 3:00am. Indeed, every person who participates in the life of this congregation, including joining in worship on a Sunday morning, is responding in a way similar to Mary's acceptance of her call.

Blessedly, not many of us have had to deal with the trauma of an angel appearing bringing stunning news and clearly elucidating just what it is that God wants from us. That may be a good thing for a couple of reasons: on the one hand it keeps down heart attacks, and on the other helps to prevent us from getting into meaningless arguments of "my angel had a more important message than your angel!" But just the same, all of us have experienced a call from God in some way: a nudge from a friend or relative or even a stranger; or maybe a situation that pushed or pulled us in the direction of faith; it might have been a feeling, an urge, a sense of duty; or perhaps an emptiness of some sort that drew us into seeking meaning, value, purpose. I think most of us can articulate our sense of just how God tapped us on the shoulder saying, "I have a task for you", even if we are often embarrassed to put it into words. And everyone here has responded to that call, at the very least by being here! Every one of us has in one way or another echoed Mary's words, "let it be with me according to your word".

And so here we are, as disparate a group as you might imagine, from places all over the globe, with backgrounds and experiences and interests as diverse as could be expected. But here together with one thing in common: our response to God's call. To be sure, our responses take on as many different shapes as we are numbered, but for all of that we still share at the heart of it all a basic response typified by Mary: "let it be with me according to your word."

In this final countdown to Christmas Eve we have a blessed opportunity to focus upon the commonality of our response, to draw closer to that heavenly event in Bethlehem, to draw closer to Mary, and to draw closer to one another. This is such an opportune moment to gather together like a family clustered at the nursery window cooing over the newborn, a wondrous opportunity to celebrate our togetherness, to recognize how through God's grace we share in that blessed event of Jesus' birth, that moment when the light of God's love came into the world, pushing back the darkness and providing a beacon calling us to him. May the blessing of that first Christmas gift, the Christ-child, continue to unite us in faith and continue to unite us in our response, "let it be with us according to your word."