

“Angels”

John 1:1–5; Luke 1:26–38

An angel announces the coming of heaven to earth, the collision of the transcendent and the immanent.



The story of Christmas, this tale of God Almighty’s incarnation, thrusts us into the transcendent and the immanent, God above and God with us, God who is Other and God born a babe in Bethlehem. Today’s two Scripture passages take us toward the Cosmic, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and was God,” and the earthly “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph.” I suppose it is God’s messenger, the angel named Gabriel, who brings this collision of the transcendent and the immanent into focus.

The transcendent

It is John’s opening, his prologue, that ushers us into the realm of the heavens. In eighteen verses, John prepares us for everything that comes after: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1).”

The Word? In the Old Testament, God often acts by means of his “word.” For example, in Genesis, God speaks his creation into existence. God said, “Let there be light” and there was light. Our own words can be a little like that. When we say, “I promise,” we create a promise. Using “the Word” to refer to Jesus is a way for John to tell us that Jesus creates. God had brought light into the darkness at the beginning, in and through Jesus; now, God is doing it again. John’s “in the beginning” evokes the opening words of Genesis and prepares us for the recurring New Testament theme of new creation.

We probably have a pretty good idea what John means when he describes Jesus as the true light that overcomes the darkness. But we may not be so clear what John means when he writes that “we have seen his glory” (verse 14). A person’s “glory” is their true and essential character revealed for everyone to see. To glorify Jesus is to lift him up so that everyone can see his essential goodness, love, and righteousness.

When Moses was with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses asked to see God’s glory. But Moses had to hide when God’s glory passed by. He could not see God’s face and live. But, John writes, in Jesus we see “the glory of the father’s only son.” Jesus is God made flesh. John says, if you want to know what God is like, take a long look at Jesus. Look at him, see God.¹ N. T. Wright writes:

[John begins with] the unforgettable opening words: ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ At once we know that we are entering a place which is both familiar and strange. ‘In the beginning’—no Bible reader could see that phrase and not think at once of the start of Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ Whatever else John is going to tell us, he wants us to see his book as the story of God and the world, not just the story of one character in one place and time. This book is about the creator God acting in a new way within his much-loved creation. It is about the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.

As we approach Christmas, it is good for us to remember that Jesus glorified God, that is to say, Jesus revealed to us God’s true character. How? In his death on the cross. Speaking of the “glory of the cross” seems odd given the humiliating and terrifying nature of crucifixion. Yet, the cross is the concrete expression of God’s

¹ In verse 17, John writes, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth through Jesus Christ.” Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. He is the true revelation of God, full and complete, not a copy given indirectly through Moses. In this sense, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, for he is true embodiment of the Law.

love. Later in John's beginning, John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus exclaims, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). This is a Christmas love I can scarcely comprehend. And it brings us to the immanent, God-with-us -- born in a manger.

The immanent

The simple, holy dignity of Luke's gospel is evident throughout this passage and it will repay a slow reading. Luke opens his Gospel (Luke 1:5-25) by telling us how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, an old priest going about his daily duties. That would certainly be a frightening experience; there is a reason the angels always say, "Be not afraid," when they show up.

Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, to be named John, who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." This child would grow to be John the Baptist. (More about this story next week.)

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time.² Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow!

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her! Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne! Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin. How could she possibly explain a pregnancy? What would everyone assume, even Joseph? Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The word "overshadow" (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all. Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children.

I'm sure that Mary must have found all this too much to comprehend. But Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Notice that Gabriel uses the future tense, echoing Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn't visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God's story to move forward. The Cosmic collides with the Ordinary!

The Name of Jesus

Though we often take names for granted, in the Bible names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. God's revealing of his name to Moses was a momentous event in the story of the exodus (Exodus 3:13-15). Sometimes, God would even change a person's name to convey a new meaning, such as changing Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5).

The angel, Gabriel, tells Mary that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

The name, Joshua (or Yeshua) was a very ordinary name in Jesus' day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called "the Son of the Most High," a striking title,

² In most ancient cultures, indeed for most of human history, people married young, pretty much as soon as they were old enough for sex and, hence, children.

and that he will sit on David's throne, where he will reign over God's people (the "House of Jacob") forever. Indeed, Jesus' "kingdom will have no end." All this is in keeping with promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

Advent in the midst of pandemic

Fears test our faith, whether it is the fear of covid, job loss, illness, failure, or anything else in our extensive catalogue of worries. The question is whether we will hold tight to God and to our confidence that we are his, the sheep of his pasture. Faith is no guarantee of an easy or worry-free life; God has made us no such promise. But it is faith for which we have been made, a people created in God's image who are to know God and enjoy God forever. And it is in the lived faith of disciples that we can find the peace that passes all understanding and the confidence that one day God's mercy, justice, and healing will transform our world and each of us. Let us be more like Mary, who in the face of frightful perplexity, simply said, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).