

# **“Gabriel—Mysterious Messenger of God”**

Luke 1:26-38

Fourth Sunday in Advent, Dec. 21, 2014

Did you know that the word **“angel”** appears **273 times in the Bible**? The English word **“angel”** comes from a Greek word that appears in the New Testament **“aggelos;”** the primary meaning of which is **“messenger.”** And the same thing is true of its **Old Testament Hebrew equivalent**, the word **“ma’lak;”** the primary meaning of which is also **“messenger.”**

**Unfortunately there are many misconceptions** that even **some Christians may have about angels.** One of the **most insensitive comments** I remember someone say to the **parents of a teenaged girl who had died** at the funeral was: **“I guess God took her because he needed another angel!”**—as if human beings become angels when welcomed into their heavenly home! **No, angels are created beings in a category unique unto themselves;** created by God at the dawn of creation. Because angels **neither marry, nor reproduce, nor die;** the **number of angels that there are in God’s great celestial realm never changes; never increases or decreases.** And because angels are **spiritual beings** and **not physical beings,** they may be very much **“present with us,”** even though their presence is **not visible** or **detectable to us.**

Yes, sometimes, **angels appear in the form of ordinary men; as they appeared in the form of three weary travelers one day to the Patriarch Abraham** when he was sitting outside of his tent, under the **Oaks of the Mamre (Genesis 18:1)** on a very hot day; when these angels had come to announce to him and Sarah the impending birth of their future son Isaac. **Yes,** and you **might remember** also that even **one of the angels who appeared inside of the empty of tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning,** Mark tells us, simply appeared there, in the **guise of a young man too (Mark 16:5);** though **most** of the angels that appeared on Easter morning---were like those angels who descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it, **whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothing was white as snow (Matthew 28:2-3; Luke 24:4).**

**The Bible also teaches us that there are very classifications of angels.** There are, let’s say, the **regular type of angels** who are called **“angels,”** and then angels of a higher rank with more authority entrusted to them known as the **“archangels.”** The **“seraphs”** or the **“seraphim”** are the types of angels that were seen hovering all around the **throne of God,** when Isaiah was seated in the **temple one day, when the Spirit of God first called upon him to become a prophet (Isaiah 6).** On that day the whole foundation of that enormous temple shook, and was **“it was filled with smoke.”** And *Isaiah “saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim! Each one of them had six wings; with two they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet and with two they flew, calling out to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:1-4).* The **“cherubs”** or the **“cherubim”** are the angels who first appeared in the **Garden of Eden to guard the door to the Tree of Life** after Adam and Eve, our first parents, had fallen into sin (Genesis 3:24).

But today is the **Fourth Sunday of Advent**—when we are given an opportunity to consider again the great role that the **Angel Gabriel** played in the **whole nativity story,** not only in first of all announcing to the **priest Zechariah,** that **his wife Elizabeth** would give birth to **a son even in their old age,** to be named **John;** that is **John the Baptist, who would become the forerunner of Christ.** But this same **Angel “Gabriel”** (name means **“God is my strength!”**) now announces to this young peasant girl **“Mary”** that she will become the blessed **Virgin Mother of our Lord** and that she had been **chosen by God** to give birth to the **long-awaited and Promised Messiah.**

**One thing that has always puzzled me personally about these two different accounts, both found in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel,** is why does Zechariah end up being chastised by the Angel Gabriel for some a really big question, he voices, that was lurking within his heart; **while Mary, the Mother of Jesus, doesn’t even receive** so much as small slap on the wrist for **the question that she raises?**

In **Luke 1:18**, we hear **Zechariah** asking **Gabriel**, **"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years!"** And in **Luke 1:34**, we hear **Mary** asking **Gabriel**, **"How shall this be, since I am a virgin?"**

**I can tell you how many commentators answer this question.** Even though the **glorious promise** made to the priest **Zechariah** sounds absolutely incredible to him, since he and his wife are both long past their prime and certainly not "spring chickens" anymore; on top of the fact that Elizabeth had been barren all throughout their married lives, is **because Zechariah, as a priest, of all people should have known better—because of his own theological training.**

**"Zechariah"** whose name means **"The LORD has remembered,"** and Elizabeth his wife, whose name means **"God is my oath"** were a godly couple who both belonged to a priestly line. Zechariah descended from the **priestly line of Abijah** and **Elizabeth descended from the daughters of Aaron** (Luke 1:5). In spite of all the godlessness around them, St. Luke tells us: **"They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord."** Their **only sorrow** was that they had **no family**, and they made this a matter of **constant prayer**. Little did they know that God would answer their prayers and give them, not only to become a priest, but son who would become a prophet; no ordinary prophet for he would be the **herald of the coming King!**

**Even though Zechariah may have felt that his doubts were justifiable; perhaps they weren't justifiable at all—**for he definitely would have been very familiar with those stories in the Old Testament on more than a few occasions, how **God had given Isaac as a son to that barren woman named Sarah, the wife of the Patriarch Abraham, and how even the Prophet Samuel would one day be born to a formerly barren woman named Hannah.** In former times signs has been given, without reproach or punishment, to people like **Abraham (Genesis 15) and Gideon (Judges 6) who had asked for them in the same manner. But they still were living in the twilight period of the divine revelation** and had not had as many opportunities as Zechariah to know God in his great might and mercy! On him, therefore, there rested without a doubt a great responsibility, and his unbelief must have merited at least some form of chastisement.

**Besides this, Gabriel was no mere human being that was standing there on the right side of the altar next to Zechariah. He was an angel, for goodness sakes! Should not his haloed appearance have provided much support for the news he was sharing?** In response to Zechariah's expression of his great personal doubts saying, **"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (v. 18),** the angel answered him, **"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news! And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time!" (Luke 1:19-20)**

**The personal study that I did on this first chapter of Luke a couple of weeks ago** reminded me once again of those words which Jesus said one day, recorded for us in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel: **"Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more!" (Luke 12:48)** And these words apply to the gift of our personal faith as well!

**And St. James tells us** in the third chapter of his letter recorded for us in the **New Testament:** **"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).** And here the Bible is not simply speaking about the ordained clergy who are teachers of the Word of God, but also **Youth Group Leaders, Sunday school teachers of small children, middle-school aged children, high school young adults; college students and adults of all ages!** The teachers of God's Word will be held to a higher standard, not only when it comes to **our outward behavior, but I would suspect when it comes to allowing our faith to become the only true antidote for our fears.** **And living with Christian courage doesn't mean that we go through life without any fears,** but we go ahead and do the right thing because it is the right thing to do even in spite of our fears—**that's the meaning of courage!**

**Do you remember that day when Jesus was in a boat with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee; when suddenly a great storm arises on the water! There is lightning and thunder and mighty gusts of wind everywhere! The disciples are straining at their oars; doing their best to make certain that their small fishing vessel does not capsize. But where is Jesus? Soundly asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat! Finally, they wake up Jesus—and they wake him up with the most accusatory question possible: "Lord, don't you care that we perish!?" (Mark 4:38) This is when Jesus stands up and says, "Peace be still," and the waters become as completely calm and flaccid as a sheet of glass. But then there is the follow up question of our Lord to his fearful disciples, "O you, of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31)**

**And so it seems to me that perhaps there are those times when God might be just a bit more understanding of some peoples' doubts than he might be others.**

**Following the resurrection, Thomas was not present with the other 10 disciples in the Upper Room that first Easter evening when suddenly—the Risen Christ appeared among them. He insisted that he would not believe until he could see Jesus alive with his own eye, and place his own hands in Jesus' hands and side. Yet, one week later, when the Risen Christ appears to Thomas too, it doesn't seem that Jesus was terribly upset with Thomas. Yes, he had his doubts, but all the other disciples did too who would not believe the report of the women who had heard the message of the angels and saw for themselves with Risen Christ.**

**And so we come to Mary. The Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her some remarkable news that God had chosen her to become the Mother of the long-awaited Promised Messiah, who would be called none other than the Son of the Most High God (Luke 1:32). "And the Lord God 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!" (Luke 2:32).**

**She asks: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Yet it is possible that Mary isn't expressing any personal doubts here at all. What motivated her question was not the fact that she should give birth to the Savior of the world! Her question was much more logistical in nature! She was questioning not the reality of that which the Angel Gabriel said would take place, as mysterious as all of that was! She wanted answers regarding God's *modus operandi*; his mode of operation. And besides she did not have the same amount of theological acumen as did Zechariah, or we have no reason to believe that she did! **MARY KNEW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN, BUT SHE DID NOT HOW IT WOULD HAPPEN!** Her question in verse 34 was not an evidence of unbelief, as Zechariah's question was (v. 18). Rather, it was an expression of her faith. **SHE BELIEVED THE PROMISE, BUT SHE DID NOT UNDERSTAND THE PERFORMANCE.** How could a virgin give birth to a child? Then the Angel Gabriel proceeds to explain to her that it certainly would be a miracle; all the result of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé would not be the child's father (Matthew 1:18-25), even though Jesus would be legally identified as the son of Joseph (Luke 3:23; 4:22). And the Angel Gabriel ended his message by giving Mary a word of encouragement. Her aged relative Elizabeth was with child, proving that "with God nothing shall be impossible." God gave a similar word to Abraham when he announced the future birth of Isaac (Gen. 18:14). That our God can do anything is the witness of many people; including Job (42:2), Jeremiah (32:17) and Jesus (Matthew 19:26).**

**And so what is the condition to be found in our own hearts, dear friends, three days from today when we too will be given an opportunity to take part in another world-wide celebration of our Savior's birth? Are we still plagued with unnecessary doubts regarding the veracity of everything we will soon be celebrating? And if so, isn't it time for us to hear the very command that Jesus gave to Thomas on that very first Sunday after the very first Easter? **Jesus says, "Stop disbelieving and believe!" (John 20:27)****

**Maybe this Fourth Sunday in Advent is a good time to hear the question that the Lord Jesus asked his disciples in that boat one day after he calmed the storm and made the rough seas**

upon the Sea of Galilee suddenly become as **calm and smooth as a sheet of glass**. **Let's here Jesus asking each one of us again today: "O you, of little faith, why do you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31)**

**Brothers and sisters, in the 1980s there was a terrible coal mining accident that took place in the Allegheny Mountains. Many miners escaped, but three men were trapped somewhere deep inside of the earth, with no possibility of freeing themselves. No one knew if they were dead or alive. As the hours passed, intense heat and noxious gases built up within the mine itself. Two days passed before a three-man search team was allowed to enter the mine.** Just before their entry, a television reporter interviewed these men, each of whom was fully aware of the noxious gases and the extreme danger connected with their rescue mission.

**He asked them: "Are you still going down?"**

One of the three men replied, **"Those men may still be alive."** Without another word of explanation, he and the other two men put on their gas masks, climbed into the elevator, and descended into the mine. And fortunately their rescue mission turned out to be a great success!

**"Are you still going down?"** Though the **Bible does not quite speak** of it exactly this way, one hymn writer does conjecture this in that great Lenten hymn: **"A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" (LW 111)**. In verse 2 we listen to the command of the Heavenly Father to his eternally-begotten Son: **'Go down, my Son,' the Father said, "to free my children from their dread, of death and condemnation. The wrath and stripes are hard to bear, but in your death they all can share the joy of your salvation!" (v. 3b)** In verse 3 we listen to the answer of God the Son to his Father: **"Yes, Father, yes, most willingly, I bear what you command me. My will conforms to your decree; I risk what you have asked me!" (v. 2a)**

Well, we know that the **Son of God did come down to us as we prepare to celebrate his birthday once again this coming Wednesday and Thursday!** Because he has come down to us, **God's light has shone into our darkened world**. Because he has come down to us, **the least and the lowliest people of this world, like Mary the Virgin Mother of our Lord, has been exalted!**

You know it was a very mysterious message that the Angel Gabriel had come to share with the Blessed Virgin Mother of our Lord, and I am sure she was completely astonished and full of wonder at the words which he spoke to her.

**But I also wonder who left there that day the most astonished? Was it Mary or was it Gabriel? For angels, though they are without sin and though they never die, like God, do not share completely in all the divine attributes of God. They are not omnipresent—present everywhere like God, but are only at one place at a time! They are not omnipotent—all-powerful like God, for their power is limited. Nor are they omniscient like God—all-knowing like God, for their knowledge is limited. So I wonder who ended up being the most astonished on that day! Was it Mary, who certainly heard some shocking news, or was it Gabriel—because Mary's answer was one of complete submission to whatever it was that the LORD God almighty had in store for her. With complete faith and a spirit of self-surrender she says, "Let it be to me even as you have said, for I am but a servant (handmaiden) of the Lord!"**

One more little Christmas joke: **Did you hear about the two blondes who went into the frozen woods of Minnesota in search of the perfect Christmas tree?** After two hours of subzero temperatures and a few close calls with hungry wolves, one blonde turned to the other and said, "I'm chopping down the next tree I see. I don't care whether it's decorated or not!"

**Hmm... I am starting to wonder if there might not be some Christians who will gather together to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord this coming Wednesday evening, but will do so with little joy and hardly any enthusiasm,** because just like the Christmas tree that those blondes were looking for in the frozen woods, they imagine that they have to provide their own Christmas decorations for themselves. This is certainly not the message that the Prophet Isaiah shared with us in

our Old Testament lesson, last Sunday, from Isaiah 61 was it? No! Listen again, "***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has sent me to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified!***" (Isaiah 61:1-3)

**May God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit so decorate us—this coming Christmas Eve! Amen**