

Letting Angelic Visitations Get to You

Luke 1:26-35

(Second Sunday in Advent – December 7, 2008)

The Christmas story begins with this strange incident: (read Luke 1:26-35) “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. But she was much perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David....Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.”

It then goes on to say that after the angel departed, Mary went to tell her cousin Elizabeth about Gabriel’s having stopped by to tell her she was pregnant and to discuss with her what to make of it. Elizabeth reassured her that it was undoubtedly real, that it must be true and that it was wonderful. Mary then bursts forth with what has come to be called “The Magnificat,” a song/poem which is one of the scriptures often set to music for Advent. It said, in part: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name. From generation to generation God’s mercy is upon those who stand in awe of him.”

It was, by any standard, an exceptional response to her experience. Put yourself in the story if you can. You were informed late last night, by strange means that you are being handed, without your permission or consultation, a totally unexpected and very unorthodox pregnancy. “Congratulations and we’ll be in touch,” the angel says in effect as he departs.

It is my guess that most of you women might not react by writing hymns or poems of wonder this morning. In fact, it would not shock me if we didn’t get so much as a single, singable hymn from any of you under those circumstances. Far more likely than poetic exclamations of ecstasy and wonder might well be: “Why me?” or “How can I possibly handle this?” or “Can I afford it?” or “How will I explain it?” or “What is my husband or fiancé going to make of this?” or “What about everything else I had planned for this coming year?”

According to the story, though, not only Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, but almost everyone else is reported to have been enthralled. In addition to Mary's ecstasy, nine months later some farmhands became so overcome with astonishment and excitement that they abandoned their sheep to go check this out; professional astrologers (not even of the same religion) were so filled with awe that they made an extended trip out of their country under the spell of some unverifiable certainty that this had to be of cosmic importance.

As part of the Christmas story that is certainly charming, but don't you find it a little difficult to relate to it? It's not that you and I never feel any wonder. Probably most of us have had our wonder-filled moments -- ones in which we felt quite touched by something or other. Moments like that may come, for example, with extraordinary sunsets or perhaps with standing under our star-spangled summer skies or as part of our response to the birth of a child or grandchild or at realizing we've survived a close call of some sort or simply as a brief surge of gratitude in an unguarded moment.

But even so, I suspect that most of us very quickly manage to get hold of ourselves and get back to the "real, nitty-gritty facts of living." Any more, feelings of wonder and awe are put aside quickly, as if they were one of those episodes of lightheadedness one can get if he jumps up from a chair too rapidly. Awe is an interesting thing to visit for a moment or two, but post-modern living demands our being too carefully rational, realistic and under control to allow anything like that to affect what we think or do.

For a lot of us, to take seriously one's own ecstatic moments, unbridled fervency, enchanting experiences feels intellectually disreputable. There seems to be a real need to explain them away, discount or minimize them. Doing that to the Christmas story would leave it sounding something like this: "Near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, a woman in late adolescence, only recently married to a peasant carpenter, gave birth to a male child. Unfortunately the birth took place in substandard accommodations while the couple was on an obligatory business trip to the husband's town of origin in Judah. There were some unverifiable reports of unusual phenomena at or near the time of the birth but these remain unsubstantiated. Because of King Herod's unfortunate new anti-family policy the family relocated to Egypt as soon as the mother and infant were able to travel." That's it! That's the "bottom line." And as bottom lines tend to be, it's accurate and objective. True, it doesn't awaken much in the way of feeling. There's not much there to enthrall or inspire anyone (One doesn't respond by thinking, "I've got to write a song about that!"). But it's antiseptically objective and thus a lot more manageable; especially for those of us who have come to find awe and mystery to be faintly embarrassing, who feel much safer and more sophisticated with the provable, practical minimum.

A dull, colorless world is part of the price one pays for doing that: for trying to be scrupulously logical, always scientific, and tightly under control with everything at all times. So concepts like that of a person “being called,” or the possibility that dreams could be something to which we need to listen, or the ability to allow grateful impulses to have their way with us, or the imagination to consider that something could be true and still be unprovable – all that and more becomes foreign. At most it is relegated to the realm of poets, children, and a few simple-minded adults.

A patron saint of that sort of thing was a father, who, with his young daughter, was flying from New York to Los Angeles. The daughter sat in the window seat and kept exclaiming, “Daddy look! There’s a river over there that’s all silver.” “Look Daddy, the water in that lake is more blue than the sky!” “Daddy, that’s a whole town full of people down there and I can see it all at the same time!” The father was reading The Wall Street Journal and responded, “Uh huh. That’s nice, Honey! Yeah right” and “Yes, I know.” The one telling this said that it was obvious that the father was becoming impatient and irritated with his daughter’s childlike outbursts of unrestrained ecstasy AND was also embarrassed by it. So embarrassed did he become that he finally turned to the passengers in the seats around them and apologized, saying: “Please forgive my daughter. She still thinks everything is wonderful.”

How awful of her! How inappropriate! How embarrassing for the father to be saddled with someone who was jubilant and awestruck and deeply moved by what she was seeing and experiencing – who was so immature, unsophisticated and uncontrolled to experience the moment as wonderful. What an aggravating thing to have that intruding into her father’s concentration upon the truly important, bottom-line realities as presented and decreed by The Wall Street Journal.

For that father and all of his spiritually challenged brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles (and there are countless millions) the annual Advent season is one of the few remaining reminders to get one’s head screwed back on straight. For shining through all that illogical, impractical, unprovable imagery of angels, stars, and miracles is a hint (maybe even a glimpse) of the fact that there really is a whole other dimension of experiencing, another kind of truth and understanding, a language of the spirit that easily gets away from us. In fact, it becomes all but out of reach to the intellectually hidebound. It has to do with the quiet little off-the-wall feelings that still occasionally try to break in upon even the coldest of us, the strange impingement upon the thinking of even the most dogmatic of us, the flashes of awe that still sneak in upon the most skeptical, the unstoppable lump in the throat or tear in the eye or tender impulse of the most controlled of us. Getting back in touch with that dimension of us couldn’t be more needed than right now in a time when people actually seem to pride themselves in being just as one-dimensional, pragmatic, unaffected and impervious as they can possibly make themselves.

Yes, it's a subtle but serious distortion to which, the smarter we get, the more susceptible we become. It impoverishes our spirits and our lives when, somewhere along the way we lose our God-given capacities to allow truth to reach us in non-intellectual ways, when we limit ourselves to taking seriously only that which we can measure or control, and when we refuse to know anything that we can't explain. Whether we're comfortable with it or not, the truth is that we were created to be nourished in our living not only through our intellects, but also through intuition, through imagination, through awe and wonder, and all manner of other non-verbal, unmeasurable and not necessarily logical or explicable ways. Our spirits become starved, moreover, when we pretend and proceed in life as if that were not so.

Appropos, then, of this season, to the extent that one allows him or herself once more to become vulnerable to that, there is more that might get to us in the Christmas story than we may have been noticing. The story claims, for example, that God the creator, in a very specific and intentional way, intervened (and intervenes) in our human history. God is still speaking, and God may be speaking directly to you! If that is so, the implications are truly awesome, not only in what it says about God, but in what it says about you and me and what it says about life. If one can let this story cause him to imagine that God really got that specific, that involved, that down-to-earth and personal with human beings, one might have to wonder what else God might be up to – even now!

Another way that the story strangely nudges the soul has, in fact, to do with the very unreasonable, illogicalness of it. "Why her?" "Why them?" "Why there?" "Why then?" If, rather than logically dissecting it one feels his way into that, he could end up asking himself, "How do I know that the crazy set of circumstances that have been thrust upon me, the unreasonable demands suddenly being made upon you, the seemingly senseless struggle she is undergoing, the way he has suddenly been put on the spot lately, might not be God's word becoming flesh in just as odd a fashion as did the old story about the long donkey-ride following Mary's not-quite-all-the-way-in-wedlock pregnancy." Can anyone (one could wonder) be certain when he's in the middle of it, that whatever it is might not be a "calling" rather than a "curse?"

Yet another part of it that could get to you, is that which it said the angels sang; that is, the part about God's good will toward human beings: of God actually being pleased with humankind rather than smouldering with anger and obsessed with punishment. What if God were like THAT, rather than as so often represented: as a picky, reproachful, uptight, impatient, disapproving, narrow-minded, accusatory deity who can barely forgive us for the very humanness with which we were born? Do you see? If people ever ended up believing that God is actually pleased with us, excited about us, hopeful in regard to us; that would wipe out a lot of uptightness and long-standing religious guilt and numbing trepidation about life. But this is the kind of truth that one must sense. No

respectable intellect can take seriously something that was reported to have been sung 2000 years ago by heavenly beings in the wee hours to entry-level farmworkers, can one? C'mon! Try to get hold of yourself!

Then, too, there is that wonder-filled intimation echoing all through the story to the effect that there simply is far more going on and far more in process than we can see or know or prove. This implies, that whether you get to see it or not, what we are and that which we give and the loyalty or empathy or hope or courage that we pour into our days and years is not wasted or lost.

Can I show you where all of that is carefully spelled out in a scientifically satisfactory way in the Bethlehem incident during the reign of Herod? No, I can't. It's not that kind of information – not the kind with which the practical, orderly, logical side of our brains, might ever feel comfortable. But for those who haven't quite beaten to death their ability to be nourished by awe, by wonder, by ecstasy, for those who are still humble and open enough to allow truth to touch them that hasn't been screened and minimized or beaten into submission by the intellect, for those who still have just enough holy imagination to toy with the possibility that God would do things, would use people and would intervene by means that we find incomprehensible and mysterious, this story comes once a year to remind us that God's ways and intentions are still larger and more mysterious and more awesome than yours or my last great intellectual formulation or belief.

So since it's December anyway, why not give the story another crack at you; maybe even let it get to you!