

The Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 18, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 1:26-38

"Foretold"

I've heard it said that one of the biggest fears that people have is public speaking, and I can understand why that might be the case. Any time that you've got to go in front of a number of people who'll be watching you and listening to what you'll have to say, that can be unnerving. What if you make a mistake? What if you don't use the right words or miss some points? What if your audience doesn't like what you've got to say? You could be setting yourself up for embarrassment later on. With all those people looking on, no wonder public speaking is a pretty common fear. But there's something else that almost always strikes fear into the heart of men and women, something that we hear a lot more about this time of the year: angels.

If you're wondering, "What's so frightening about angels?" I'd understand. The angels on the cards at the Hallmark store aren't at all threatening. The ones that show up in the Christmas pageants that take place in these closing weeks of Advent are usually cute little ones, dressed up and shining in white and gold. And I don't know of any angel atop a Christmas tree that would make people fear. But none of those are real angels. Throughout the Scriptures, whenever a *real* angel would appear, people were first struck by fear. But while angels might be pretty intimidating beings, they always arrive for a reason: an angel delivers God's message. The word "angel" originates from the Greek word *ἄγγελος* which means "messenger." Any time an angel shows up, we can ask two questions: "**What's the message?**" and "**Why does the message matter?**"

In today's Gospel, the angel Gabriel – one of the few angels whose name is recorded in the Bible – appears to Mary, and does he have a message for her! It is a message as amazing as it is brief: God in His grace will do an amazing thing in and through this young woman by providing the long-foretold Messiah. Her child, Jesus, would be the one and true King, the Savior who would deliver the world. Gabriel brought this message from God to Mary, and as is the way of God's Word, the **delivery of the message makes it reality**. It is *powerful*. This young woman, a virgin who had never known a man, was overshadowed by the power of God and the Holy Spirit cause a baby, the very Son of the Most High, to be conceived in her womb. Why does this message matter? This good news that God was acting to save His people – in a long foretold but completely unexpected way – transformed the world. It certainly transformed Mary's life, even at its telling, **this gospel transformed Mary's initial fear and uncertainty into obedience**. In response to Gabriel's astounding message, Mary questions how such a thing would be possible. That seems like a perfectly reasonable question, doesn't it? The angel proclaims, though, that with God nothing will be impossible. And it is so! The same Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters in the creation of the universe now brings the Son of God into human form to be born a flesh-and-blood child. In the presence of God's grace, Mary submits to the angel's message for her. What was foretold has come to pass.

In these closing days of Advent, you have a message to share. Last weekend, a challenge was issued for each and every one of us, a challenge to go and pray for someone that you know who is outside of the church, then to invite them to hear the message that God has given His people to share. Invite that person to come with you for worship as we celebrate that birth that came nine months after Gabriel delivered God's message of grace to young Mary. **Invite them to hear the message, and why it matters**. You are now a messenger, an "angel" of our Lord.

This is a challenge, though. If people fear public speaking in general, how much more so do many Christians –especially Lutherans, it seems – fear delivering the gospel of Jesus? I can understand why that might be the case. When you bear witness to your faith in Jesus, talking to

friends, to coworkers, to family, you put yourself on the line. There's risk involved. What will they think about you if you talk about Jesus, born of a virgin and put to death on a cross? You may be rejected, just as the world rejects Jesus. And rejection hurts. It's safer for you to say nothing. It's easier than warning someone of God's coming judgment with Jesus' return at his next Advent. And that is how we fail in the challenge, the responsibility that has been entrusted to us as God's messenger. On our own, we run away from the risk. On our own, we run away from Jesus and the life that He would have us live. We would rather live our own way, be our own god. On our own, we are afraid to acknowledge the message of grace that came into our world, the message that Gabriel delivered so long ago. It's impossible for us to do otherwise. But recall what else Gabriel said: *"with God nothing will be impossible."*

God's message makes the formerly impossible happen: in us and through us. God transforms you into His messenger by His grace, giving you what you need to deliver the message that He is sending. Recall the two questions we've asked: What's the message? Why does the message matter? God's message for you and for all the people around you is what we celebrate in this Advent season, the same that Gabriel proclaimed, that the Son of God has come, for us! He has come into the world and into our lives to ransom us from captivity to our sin, from captivity to the devil, from captivity to death. He has come to forgive and restore. He has come bring life where none could be. Why does that matter? The only alternative, our default state, is to be lost in fear. But God transforms fear into holy obedience through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Savior long foretold throughout the ages has come into the world. God has kept His promise. As we've recalled throughout this season of Advent, we now look ahead to our Lord's foretold return. As we wait in hope, we have a message to share. **What was once foretold, we now tell forward.** By God's grace, the delivery of that message of salvation through His Son makes it a reality. He transforms our fear into obedience and brings us into life as it is meant to be, lived with Jesus as our King. And God will do the same in the lives that are touched by that gospel message which we tell forward.

In this last week of Advent, as we move into the celebration of Jesus' birth, share Gabriel's good news with the world around you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God: **you are His messengers!**

Amen.