

***The Gift Revealed***  
**Advent & Christmas: “The Perfect Gift”**  
**Sermon on Luke 1:26-56 (12/20 & 12/21/14)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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“She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone *this* child, but he’d been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said.

“As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath [his] great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”<sup>1</sup>

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Those were the words of pastor and writer Frederick Buechner – a piece entitled simply “Gabriel.” I first read them well over a decade ago...and I still get choked-up every time I read them. Listen again:

“She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone *this* child, but he’d been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn’t be afraid, Mary,’ he said.

“As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath [his] great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”

*“The whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl...”*

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For about the last 15 years, my extended family on my mom's side has gathered in Milwaukee most years for Thanksgiving. Over the course of that time, many babies have been born to my cousins and cousins-in-law. In fact, it has not been uncommon for at least one female member of the family to be pregnant when we gather for Thanksgiving – or for there be a relatively new baby among us.

The day after Thanksgiving three years ago, about half a dozen of my female family members and I were gathered in a small living room area at my aunt and uncle's house, talking about pregnancy and having babies. (Since I have no direct experience with either thing, I recall doing a lot of quiet nodding.)

My cousin Grace has just entered the third trimester of her pregnancy with her first child – and she was pretty scared: about labor, about the delivery,

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<sup>1</sup> “Gabriel” by Frederick Buechner in *Beyond Words*.

about caring for an infant...about it all. She was beautifully vulnerable with us and we all did our best to offer support and care.

We had the kind of conversation women can have when there are no men in the room. My cousin wanted answers. She wanted cold, hard facts about what might happen in the delivery room...so my relatives who had had babies told her what she could expect to happen during the delivery and in the days and weeks after it.

Graphic details were shared. Honesty was on the table. There were tears...smiles...there was laughter...we may have even prayed...and I know, without a doubt, the conversation would have shifted rapidly if even one male family member had waltzed into the room. The men are family and we love them dearly...but that conversation that day three years ago was for women only.

Men have those kinds of conversations, too, of course! The kinds of conversations that just can't happen in the same way, for whatever reasons, when women are around.

And I don't mean locker room-type bravado...I mean the kind of honest conversations that can happen only with others who share your gender. Like it or not, most of us are probably aware that men and women experience life differently. And, as much as we love "mixed company," sometimes it's nice and important to just be "with the girls" or "with the guys."

Today's reading from Luke chapter one is, for the most part, all of us getting a peek into a very holy, very intimate time for both Mary and Elizabeth.

As a woman, I am so grateful to the writer Luke for giving both Mary and Elizabeth as many words on the page as he gave them... because the other women who appear throughout our four biblical gospels aren't given very many lines on the page – especially when compared to the men who constantly appear and speak in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

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As I thought about today's reading from Luke chapter one, I thought back on a Bible study I once attended with a bunch of pastors from different denominations.

It was a weekly study for this group of pastors...and that particular day we studied this reading from Luke chapter one – this story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary to announce how she was to become the mother of Jesus...and then about how Mary visits her relative Elizabeth who is also unexpectedly pregnant.

That particular week of this study, today's reading was the one many of us were using for worship the upcoming weekend: and we needed sermon ideas! Well, very soon after we began discussing this passage of Scripture,

one of the *male* pastors in the room – not a United Methodist, incidentally – told us that, in addition to the reading about Mary and Elizabeth, he would also be including the reading from *Matthew's* Gospel about how the angel Gabriel had visited *Joseph*.

This pastor's thinking was that it was vital for people to remember that *Joseph*, too, was critical to the story.

See, in Luke's Gospel, Joseph is *not* particularly important to the story. In Luke, *Mary* is the one who gets the visit from the angel. *She* is the one on whom God's favor rests. And *she* is the one to whose thoughts we are privy in Luke. In Luke, Joseph is pretty much just along for the ride.

For who knows what reason, Joseph just wasn't all that important to the writer Luke. And, frankly, that has always been a-okay with me because the vast majority of our biblical stories center around *men*, and, the best guess of most biblical scholars is that the vast majority of our Bible was written by *men*. Inspired by God, absolutely, but recorded to the page by guys.

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When we think about history – even biblical and religious history – it is always important for us to remember just who it was who got to write the story down...*and* who then got the opportunity to publicly communicate that story to others. There is no getting around the fact that, until quite recently, it has been mostly *men* who have written and publicly communicated our Christian story since its beginning.

Now. Before you begin to get concerned that I am going to go on some sort of man-bashing rant here, please know I am not. I love men!

My father is one of the best people I know...most of my cherished teachers and mentors in ministry have been men...so many of the most dedicated servants in each of the churches I've served have been *men*...and, goodness knows, I'd like to meet and marry one someday!

I *love* men. But I also love that this particular story of Scripture – this story that is so beautifully and powerfully important to *all* of us Christians – I love that it is primarily about women.

We women do not get to read all that many positive stories in Scripture that feature *us*. Yet, once a year, around this time, we get *this* story.

In that Bible study, when my male colleague said that, alongside this story about Mary and Elizabeth, he was intentionally including the story from Matthew about *Joseph*, I wanted to shake him a little and say, “We women constantly have to relate to *men* when we read the Bible: why can't you just let us ladies have this *one day*???” //

Of course...this male colleague had absolutely no intention of disrespecting women by choosing to include a story about Joseph alongside the story about Mary and Elizabeth. I'm guessing it did not even occur to him how important Mary and Elizabeth are to so many of us Christian women...I'm guessing it also didn't occur to him that, when we hear their story, it's one of the relatively few times Scripture places exclusive, positive focus on women. And it's nice to let that stand alone.

Anyway, having shared all that, I want to mention something I *loved* that was said by another male colleague back when this fateful Bible study occurred.

On that particular date, as all of us were settling in to begin our conversation about this story from Luke chapter one, another study attendee – this one a pastor in yet another denomination – offered *his* initial thoughts on the reading by saying this: “Pregnant virgins and post-menopausal women...something weird is afoot.”

If my sermon title hadn't already been chosen by our “Perfect Gift” theme and sub-themes, I totally would have used that as my title for today's message – giving proper credit where it was due, of course: “Pregnant Virgins and Post-Menopausal Women...Something Weird Is Afoot.” Isn't that great?

See, today's reading from Luke chapter one is when the details of who God's Son *is* and what he will *do* are revealed – and the fact that there is a pregnant virgin and a pregnant post-menopausal woman in this story, has everything to do with what God is doing through this holy birth narrative.

Every detail Luke shares connected to Jesus' birth is a detail meant to teach us just what exactly God is up to through this Savior. And every single one of those details is about turning the world upside-down. Every detail surrounding Jesus' birth is a reversal from how the world *is* to how God *wants the world to be*.

Nazareth was a nothing town in a small country that was being occupied by a foreign military and government. Yet Nazareth is where God sent the angel Gabriel to bring a message about the Savior. When we read this detail, Luke wants us to imagine the world beginning to turn...the power beginning to shift.

And then, not only does Gabriel bring this message to the nothing town of Nazareth, the world takes an even bigger turn when he brings the message to a young, female, virgin.

At that time, women's status in society was *only* determined by the men to whom they were connected – and here is God's angel, telling a young, nobody, virgin, *girl*, in a nothing town, that *she* is going to be the mother of the Savior of the world. THEN...

Before Mary gives her answer, Gabriel tells her about Elizabeth – Mary's post-menopausal relative – who is six months pregnant with a son of her own. In this story, the world just keeps turning upside-down. None of this should have happened. None of it.

For thousands and thousands of years, this world has been run by the powerful, by the wealthy, by the political elite. Mary was a nobody. Israel was a nothing nation, overtaken by the Roman Empire. And Elizabeth was past her prime.

In addition to the social and political realities surrounding this story, there's simple biology working against it: virgins and post-menopausal women *can't* get pregnant. Yes, medical technology has progressed since Jesus' time...but, back then, *miracle* was the only way to explain these two pregnancies.

God chose a young virgin to bear Jesus, the Savior of the world. And God chose a post-menopausal woman to be mother of John the Baptist, the one who would prepare the way for Jesus' ministry to begin some thirty years later.

A nothing town in an occupied nation...a virgin girl and a post-menopausal woman getting pregnant...and men virtually nowhere to be found for this portion of the story. If we don't feel the world start to shift when we read Luke 1: 26-56, we are missing the point. *Entirely.*

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Mary and Elizabeth were both keenly aware that God was shifting *everything* – and each woman got the opportunity to voice her sheer amazement as part of this story.

Upon newly pregnant Mary's arrival to her home, the far-more-pregnant Elizabeth said to Mary: “God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise.”

Then, in response, Mary practically sang these words about the holy reversal God was bringing about: “With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior. He cares for me, his humble servant.

“From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him. The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. He drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing.

“He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people. The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!” //

In a culture like Mary's where men were so clearly valued over women, and where the lowly were looked-down upon by the wealthy, political elite, *everything* about today's story points to the holy reversal – to the world being turned upside-down – that comes through Jesus Christ.

And how did Luke begin to communicate this holy reversal? By, very early on, dedicating 30 verses of his story to *women* – one, a *girl virgin*, and the other, a senior citizen.

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In today's story, the Perfect Gift of Christmas has, indeed, been revealed...and, from this story, we learn that the Gift of God's Messiah is going to show up in weird places, with people we wouldn't expect, in situations that seem utterly impossible.

Does that happen to be good news to anyone else in the room today?

That God is going to show up in weird places, with people we wouldn't expect, in situations that seem utterly impossible? Does anyone else here need that good news??? Because, even though this happened 2,000 years ago, it still happens today.

The true miracle of Christmas is that God continues to be born in Jesus Christ day after day, year after year, even when things in our lives and in our world seem hopeless – in fact, *especially* when things in our lives and in our world seem hopeless.

Weird places. Unexpected people. Impossible situations. The promise of Advent and Christmas is that God *will* show up. Always. Mysteriously. Surprisingly.

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Let us pray...

*God of miracles, thank you so much for this story. In it, you remind us that what seems impossible to us is not impossible for you. So many of us, so many of our loved ones, so many in this community and world are in need of a miracle today.*

*Though you work mysteriously, bring tangible reminders of your presence to each of us this Christmas week. And, as always, inspire us to be the hands and feet of your Son – the most Perfect Gift – this day and always. In his name we pray. Amen.*