

## Impossibly Good: "Love"

Text: Luke 1:26-38

12-11-16



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**Reflection questions...** [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

*"How can this be? How is that question reverberating in your life, currently? Do you find it to be a cynical expression of frustration or simply a desire for clarity?"*

*"For what might God be asking you to trust, even in the absence of irrefutable evidence or undeniable proof? Which is more important to you, a God you can explain or one you can trust?"*

*"When have you become aware that you are in the presence of something bigger, something other, than yourself? Could you identify it as God? How did it change your perspective? How did it help to put you in perspective?"*

*"What do you feel needs to change before your, 'Yes'? How might your 'yes' embolden and transform you, right in the midst of all that remains uncertain and seemingly unaffected? What if the uncertainty is the only sure place of peace?"*

### **Today's Response:**

*"God has put \_\_\_\_\_ on my heart to reach--- either to invite back or to go toward."*

*Choose to make contact with that person, either through a card, an email, or a call, in order to let them know you are thinking about them.*

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### **Teaching Notes...**

Gabriel apparently has some form of 'angelic seniority'. He gets in on all of the really cool God-assignments: he makes the angelic baby-announcements to post-menopausal women and impotent old men; he gets to be there when virgins get the positive results of the home pregnancy tests; he gets to interpret apocalyptic dreams.

As impressive and awe-inspiring as his presence, what he apparently needs some work on is his presentation; his 'believability'. People seem to need more to go on than his announcements.

Neuroscientists tell us that our brain receives and categorizes an incredible amount of information each day. It catalogues people, experiences, smells, sounds, etc. When it doesn't have a category for

information (e.g. Christmas Fruitcake--- “bologna of the dessert world”), it will attempt to delete it or block it out. The ability to conceive of connecting seemingly disconnected things is called ‘**ideation**’.

Advent is just such a season. It demands that we allow room for that which we have no ‘catalogue number’. We don’t know where to put it but the uncertainty makes room for trust and trust invites us into surrender.

*“We now join the regularly scheduled programming, already in progress”* [announcement while watching OT game the other day]

*“Every day we wake up in the middle of something that has been going on for a long time...”* (Peterson).

I get the feeling that, sometimes, God has to interrupt our routine and well-established faith-practices in order to come to us again. He has to confront a faith that has come to ‘**know what to expect from God**’ in order that we might be open to new word, a fresh act, a new way of experiencing God.

If this story becomes isolated from the over-arching narrative, it quickly becomes seasonal and sentimental. An annual diversion from all of the hostility and incivility. An opportunity to tap into our “generous spirit” which has been lying dormant for the past 11 months.

The Story is and always has been a “salvation” story. It’s not a story that we have fabricated in order to address some sense of human angst or existential crisis. It’s a story that is certainly God-centric (“glory”), but obviously one that will not be complete without us. The “rescue-ees”. The Story identifies us. The Story orients us. The Story reassures us.

It might actually be surprising, to some, but the stories of Jesus’ birth were not of major importance to the early Christians. Neither Mark (begins his gospel with Jesus as an adult) nor John even record the event (“*Word became human and his home among us*”, John 1:14).

Neither was the issue of factuality, a concern for them. A focus on substantiating the “facts” is not only pointless, but a distraction from the real question: “*What does all of this mean?*”

Matthew and Luke both make it abundantly clear that it’s about “fulfillment”. Fulfillment necessitates some form of expectation; some anticipation of something which has yet to be experienced [Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2].

### **God intends to draw Mary into what he is doing.**

This is obviously the kind of stuff you are ‘drawn into’ because it’s anything but ‘safe’. You don’t walk into ‘assured’, but ‘confused and disturbed’; not with ‘clarity’, but ‘humility and faith’.

Mary, here, is not offering us some “impromptu” lyrics, but a song which rehearsed a story which had been inspiring song-writers, prophets and poets for some time. She reconstructs Hannah’s prayer (1 Samuel 2) from some 1,000 years prior and makes it her own. She rehearses it, not merely as some historic event, but as part of an unfolding story of which she is an integral part.

*“Without the story, what were Mary and Elizabeth to make of these angelic declarations?”*

God initiates the conversation and it is his “word” (desires; intentions) that establishes the context for what is possible. We fear, we withdraw because, most often, it’s the sound of our own voice that drowns out hope. We excuse grace because of God’s apparent lack of awareness of the impediments.

We doubt. God reassures and reorients us and, finally, there is surrender. We say yes and with our yes, we are transformed and now, suddenly able to experience something new... to offer something new to our world.

“...*you are highly favored...*” Literally, “*you are the recipient of God’s grace*” [see Ephesians 1:6, same root; only other occurrence in NT]

So, the angel doesn’t begin with our choosing God, but God choosing us! It’s how love comes to us. It affirms that our chosenness--- our place in His Story, in his world--- is conferred, not achieved.

Without it, we will be subject to other voices, each meant to desensitize us to love; to convince us that something other than love, someone other than God, is central to who we are.

John says it’s not love unless it can trace its source back to God, because “*God is love*” (1 John 4) and we distinguish it from other claims of love because it has these indispensable qualities:

... a rugged covenant commitment, meant to engender a sense of belonging and security. “You belong with me”.

... unrelenting presence; a fierce loyalty and faithfulness. A determined “with-ness”.

... a being “for” the other, where they know that love is never at risk. “You can trust yourself with me”.

... an impassioned vision of becoming which is determined by the character of the lover. It is love that actually transforms us.

## **(2) appropriate Advent responses:**

### ***“How can this be?”***

You almost presume in her response both a “*Why me?!*” and a “*Why not me?*” It is the paradox of the moment which provides for both intense anxiety and inexplicable possibility. The capacity for God to weave them together “*for our good because he loves us and we love him*” (Romans 8).

### ***“May everything you have said about me come true”.***

Mary does something irrational: she says “yes”. “I’m in.” Words that changed everything.

**It seems to start with belief and then, somehow, on the backside of belief is our experience, which validates our willingness to trust.**

### **It’s about being “over-shadowed” and not simply “over-powered”.**

“*overshadow*”- carries the sense of the holy, the Presence (of God) as used to describe the cloud “covered” [settled upon] the tabernacle (tent of meeting) and filled it with the glory of God. God’s Story, our Story, begins in Genesis with God hovering, God creating out of nothingness (*ex-nihilo*). The announcement is God settling upon and conceiving something “holy” in the darkness and void of Mary’s womb.

Mary is prototypical, in that she portrays what happens when God encounters humans (graces them) in ways which both expands the limits of what they believe possible, as well as provides the empowerment to realize something that would remain, otherwise, impossible.

Galatians 4:19 “... *Christ formed in you, (fully developed in your lives) ...*”

Colossians 1:26 “... *this is the mystery: Christ lives in you.*”

**I think our hearts demand situations which inspire “awe”.**

In order to be ‘awe-some’, they must...

... remain beyond our capacity to control or manipulate.

... confront us with our limitations.

... be indefinable; describable, but mysterious.

**Even as her song was ending, somehow everything had changed, but not much had changed.**

There were certainly precious few indicators that change was imminent--- at least not in ‘concrete ways’. Her country was still occupied by Rome; peace was still little more than conformity due to intimidation.

**Sometimes, grace comes to us as the fulfillment of something for which we have been waiting for some time. Sometimes grace comes as the expression of God’s desires, not our own. Sometimes, grace comes to us as something for which we would have never asked, but are being called upon to receive.**

Remember, Mary was told that her baby boy would be the Son of God, but not that he would deal with rejection, betrayal, suffering and crucifixion.