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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
December 21, 2008

Isaiah 7:10-17  
Psalm 89: 1-4; 19-26

## GOD'S WING MAN

Depending on how old you are, the term “wing man” means something very significant to you. If you were born in the 20s or 30s, it probably literally means someone flying an airplane. Maybe if you were born later, it refers to a football formation. And if you're a little bit younger, and a fan of Tom Cruise, it may refer to the support you need for a very dangerous task.

Gabriel functions as God's wing man in our reading today. In all reverence and respect, I'd like for us to understand just how important it is to hear the message of Luke. Some have said that the difference between reading the narrative of Christ's birth in Luke and Matthew is the difference between reading the *Saturday Evening Post* or looking at a Norman Rockwell painting. That's Luke. And if you go back and look at Matthew, that's a little bit like reading the *Wall Street Journal*. Lots of facts. Lots of pertinent details. There is something beautiful taking place, and once every two or three years we get to indulge ourselves, if you will, in Luke's account. An account which defies our cynicism, our doubts, our questions.

What is it for you that overcomes that cynical attitude or a doubtful approach to any given situation—something that addresses your concerns faster than any word or even empirical evidence? For many of us, all it takes is two witnesses telling the same story. And quickly we find our own personal experience beginning to share at a level deeper than fact—beginning to share their truth.

God sent Gabriel to a town never before heard of in scripture—not in the Torah—not listed before. And Gabriel goes to Nazareth to deliver a personal message to Mary, mother of our Lord.

In this town, that is not mentioned biblically until now, comes a greeting that also has no biblical parallel. “Hail favored one.” “Greetings, favored one.” Imagine hearing those words and trying to connect them to something you have learned at some point in church school or in years of attending to teachers. “Hail favored one?” Who is God addressing? Who's the favored one? Why are you talking to me this way? No wonder Mary was confused. If this angel is God's messenger, why here? Why now? And why me? Luke is determined to explain God's plan using a second witness for the witness' first-hand knowledge of God's might. As God's wing man, Gabriel becomes a source of reassurance, not only for Mary, but for us today.

We like to emphasize the end results of this announcement, this annunciation to Mary—how she will bear a son who will be the embodiment of God's salvation. And we usually like to skip over the unique role Mary plays in this divine plan for all humanity. But we do

so at great cost to our own understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. For you see, Mary's response is the inevitable response for all future disciples: spiritual surrender in the face of improbable circumstances.

I'm going to take a chance here. A chance that you will tolerate the irreverence of what I'm about to say. Because there's a funny little story about a young boy long ago who wanted a bicycle. He wanted a bicycle very badly. All of his friends already had a bike. And after many requests his mother finally suggested that he take his concerns to the Holy mother Mary in prayer. So Johnny wrote down his prayer on a piece of paper and placed it next to a statue of Mary on his dresser every night for a week.

He did the same thing over and over. "Mary, mother of God, could you see that I get a bicycle?" Finally, after that week was spent and he had nothing to show for all his prayers but his own disappointment, Johnny went to his dresser and took his statue of Mary and wrapped it in a towel and pushed it into the very back of his dresser drawer. And then he went to lie down. But before he went to sleep he prayed: "Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, I better get that bike."

And before we're too quick to judge Johnny or the pastor or that risky tale, if we will let Mary become for us an embodied response to the embodied message of God in Jesus Christ, one who was born to die for; if we can respond in like fashion, to the unambiguous love that God has for us, in every circumstance; if we can see in her not vague spirituality but a concrete response. Jesus, God, comes to us with a particular name—Son of the most high—and with a specific purpose and mission. He comes to reign over the House of David forever and of his kingdom there shall be no end. That's tangible. That's concrete. That's real love—in-flesh love. That's God's word. It's connected to a particular place and a particular time to a mother and a name, and a passion.

Ours is to be just as specific a response to this miraculous story of God. The miracle still demands a response beyond our ability to reason. It is the response of Mary to give up her own will and hear God calling her to fulfill the command to be a source of refreshment for others. "Let it be with me according to your will." Did they foreshadow Christ's own words in the garden? "Not my will but thine be done?"

Before we leave this passage, I think it's important for us to note what is not part of this exchange, because in this season and in our history all too often the gospel of Jesus Christ has been replaced by sort of a religious sub-culture that somehow sounds so pious and so righteous. You know what's not in this exchange between Mary and Gabriel? There's not a message that the Christmas spirit is about charity. You know what else isn't there? There isn't a feeling of guilt for anyone who has come to experience any level of comfort. I think we easily allow the gospel to become watered down to nothing more than guilt and our response of charity.

The message of Mary to us is about reordering our lives around the incarnate word who really was, who really is, and who really will be forever. “And what is that word?” you say. “How are we supposed to remember? We can’t even keep straight which one of those gospels has the nativity in it. We’ve heard it. For us it’s easy to forget.”

Isaiah said it first: remove evil from your actions. Then others like Micah said “Do justice; love kindly. Walk humbly with God.” And I would say that means walk humbly with one another, also. “Honor the new covenant God is writing on your hearts,” Jeremiah says. And when you fall short of that covenant as you inevitably will, change. Don’t continue to offer that which you know is not part of God’s plan.

Have you discovered that secret of God’s word—that secret of Christmas, the secret of life itself? That to be truly alive, living is about giving? Giving up our will for the divine will, and claiming the call to be a source of spiritual refreshment for one another? Giving in to God’s plan—a plan we will likely hear from someone else—and then living it joyfully without resentment or reservation, without manipulation—embracing the message: the message that we can in fact comprehend, or as Elliott said, apprehend. The point of interception of the timeless is past. Have you forgotten how miraculous that feels? When in your life, the timeless and the history cross?

This is that irrational season when love blooms white and wild. You see, if Mary had been filled with reason, there would have been no room left for the child. Hear the message of God’s good news to you. And allow your response to echo that which Jesus spoke to us, “Let it be with me according to your will.”

Amen.