

UNEXPECTED ANGEL

December 11, 2011

December 7th, 1941: a date which will live in infamy... and words which have become immortal. **December 7th, 1941: a date which will live in infamy:** President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's words to a joint session of Congress on December 8th, the next day. And we know why he spoke them, don't we? What happened on December 7th, 1941? Pearl Harbor: the unexpected, surprise bombing of the United States Navy by the empire of Japan. We know it even though perhaps we didn't live through it. Is there anyone who remembers it first-hand? A few. A few.

December 7th, 1941: a date that changed the world. The United States entered World War II because of December 7th, 1941, and lives and families were changed – not just that day, but over the next four years as people fought and died to protect freedom in this world and for our nation.

December 7th and other dates like it are memorable because they are so unexpected...because they are surprising...because, without us ever imagining it, they change our lives...days that are devastating days for our world that can never be the same, and for us who, because of these days, never can be the same.

So, think about your own life...think of the life that you live. Are there days in your life that are like December 7th? Is there an event in your life that changed your life forever? Is there a day...an event...that changed your life forever?

It was just another day in Nazareth for Mary. Mary was a teenaged girl growing up in small-town Israel, and her life was ordinary, uneventful, filled with the necessary routines of survival. Oh, there was a future for Mary. You see, Mary's father had promised her to Joseph to be his wife. Joseph was a carpenter...a respectable man...a good man.

And on this particular day...this ordinary day in Nazareth for Mary...Mary was lost in her chores when a stranger showed up and startled her. A stranger who looked at her and greeted her with these words: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.***

Now, this stranger's name was Gabriel, and they say he was an angel. But he looked like an ordinary guy. He didn't have a white robe, and he had no golden halo, and there were no wings attached to his back that were fluffed with feathers. What made him an angel was his message. Gabriel said to Mary:

Mary, you're going to have a baby, and you will name him Jesus which means he saves. And he will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. He will be King David's successor, and unlike King David, he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Well, Mary was stuck on the baby part. When she heard that she gulped hard so she didn't faint! All Mary could think was that this must be some kind of a cruel joke. After all, Mary was not married and, if this news was true, she never would be. Nobody would ever believe her if she told them that the child growing inside of her was of the Holy Spirit. Joseph – this one to whom

she was promised – well, he would disappear now...if he didn't have her stoned. And her father – well, he would disown her...if he didn't have her stoned.

Gabriel looked at her and he said:

You know, Mary, if you don't believe me, go visit Elizabeth. That cousin of yours – that old fossil – she's pregnant, too!

Gabriel, you see, was an unexpected angel...he was an unwelcome angel...and his message for Mary that day was devastating. It was certainly not what Mary had planned, and it was not at all what Mary had dreamed.

Yet you know, friends, it's Mary's words – not Gabriel's – that are the most startling of all because, in response to all this news that Mary never wanted or expected, Mary said this:

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

In the face of news that would change her life forever...in response to the forecast that was nothing but heartache and devastation...Mary gave her faith, and her hope, and her confidence, and her future to God: ***Here am I***, she said, ***the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***

No matter what her fate, Mary belonged to God. Mary believed that God would keep her life, and guide her way, and bless her work, every day. Mary was determined to live as the Apostle Paul commends us to live, that is:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Now, you know, in some corners of Christianity – in Roman Catholicism and in other places – there's a great deal that's made of Mary. She is called the Queen of Heaven, and she's clothed in a garb of royal blue. The church has created doctrines about this one who is the mother of Jesus – bookend doctrines that are especially important in this story. We just observed one this past Thursday, on December 8th. That doctrine is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and it's about Mary. You see, the church has believed that, ever since Adam and Eve sinned, human sin is communicated like an infection in conception. Every one of us has sin passed on to us from the moment we're conceived. But the doctrine of Immaculate Conception says that Mary – Mary alone in all of human history – was conceived without sin...immaculately. She is different from all the rest. That's the beginning of the story of Mary, and the end is the Feast of the Assumption; the doctrine of the assumption. We celebrated it on August 15th. This doctrine says that Mary did not die but rather she was assumed, body and soul, into heaven at the end of her life. These doctrines make Mary unique. They elevate her. No one else is like her in all of history. She is more than just a mere mortal; she's almost divine.

Now, because these doctrines – this Mariology as it's called – have no basis in scripture, Protestants like us have all but forgotten Mary. We've set her aside. We've let her go. Today I want to suggest to you we need to stop doing that. We need to reclaim Mary, not as unique in all of human history, but as one of us...as one *with* us. Mary, you see, is just like us. Mary could

be any of us because what makes Mary so incredible, and so amazing, and so glorious is that she trusts God...and she gives her future to God's will...and she gives her life to God's love. ***Here am I***, says Mary, ***the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***" Mary is just like us...Mary is ***any one*** of us!

When our futures lie shattered at our feet like a Christmas ornament, what does God ask of us? What plans does God have for us? When our unexpected angel shows up in *our* lives as Gabriel showed up in Nazareth for Mary, do we play that old game called ***Ain't it awful?*** Do we lick our wounds, and pick our scabs, and wallow in everything that's wrong, and that we don't want and don't like and wish would go away...everything that's not how we wanted things to be?

Or do we take Mary's part? Do we confess with Mary that the Lord is with us...the Lord is with us no matter what our circumstances happen to be, and no matter what compromises our lives are shaped by? Do we, like Mary, let God change our lives? And do we ask ourselves:

How can we welcome the possibilities of God when all of our possibilities seem to be dead ends?

How will we bring Christ into this world when we don't seem to be getting what we had dreamed?

How will we be Mary?

How will we give Jesus...yes, how will we give Jesus to others even in challenging and sometimes devastating situations?

Friends, the news is that Gabriel is coming...and Gabriel is going to be knocking on your door! So, Marlene, Gabriel says: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** Or Tim: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** Or Jeff: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** Or Patrick: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** Or Julie: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** Or Stacy: ***Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*** And you'd better be worried because that might not be such good news; at least not as you imagined good news. But the great news in all this is that whatever our circumstances, we can do great things for God...because God really is doing great things...*for* us and *through* us! No matter how discouraging our situation, God's presence in our lives isn't awful...it's wonderful! It gives us promise, and purpose, and possibility not of our own making, but of God's design.

That means, friends, that we can be generous with God in ways that we've never been generous before if we will only open our eyes, and our minds, and our hearts and our lives to God's unending generosity toward us: unexpected...unwelcome...unplanned...but generous beyond imagination.

So, when your unexpected angel drops by, what are you going to say? What are you going to say? Will you say: "Go away?" Or, "Not today?" Or will you say: ***Here am I, the servant of the Lord – Yes, here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***

When your unexpected angel drops by, what will you do? What will you do with the rest of your life? Will you ***rejoice always?*** Will you ***pray without ceasing?*** Will you ***give thanks in all circumstances?*** This is, after all, ***the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.***

For Mary, and for all of us, this is what life's about: rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances. Or, as Mary said it:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he 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. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Yes, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. When your unexpected angel shows up, get ready to be an unexpected disciple! Amen.

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