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Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

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GREETINGS, FAVORED ONE

The story is told about a pastor who was hoping to counter all the commercial Christmas frenzy swirling about his children in order to teach them what the season was all about. So he sat down at the kitchen table with his four-year-old son in the middle of December and they began the project of assembling a cardboard cutout nativity scene: stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, and the magi. “Fold on the dotted line,” the directions said. “Place tab A into slot B” and so forth. Easier read than done, of course, and within a few minutes, the project had turned into a bit of a disaster.

Nothing worked as intended. Nothing even came close to looking like the picture on the box. The Pastor dad had all but taken over the artsy project, but he fared no better than his young partner. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, spineless figures just wilting over. Pieces were frayed and taped together. The duo were both frustrated. Surveying the scene on the table, the four-year-old who was supposed to be learning that Christmas means that Jesus is God with us, asked, “So, Daddy, where is God in this mess?”¹

It is an appropriate question during any Advent season, but particularly this one: where is God in all of this mess? For those who are separated from loved ones and those who are grieving, for those who are unemployed and/or depressed, for those who are sick and tired and frightened, for those who find little meaning in their lives, and for the rest of us who feel like spineless figures just wilting over, we ask, “Where is God in all of this mess?”

Things were in more than a bit of a mess when Luke’s gospel story begins. The word ‘gospel’ means good news. Yet, the setting was that there were governing authorities that cared little about the well-being of the populace. They cared only about staying in power. The religious establishment taught that those who were suffering from poor health or poverty were in such a condition as an expression of God’s judgment against them, so there was more concern about

religious rules than there were calls for compassion or justice for those who were marginalized. The general perception seemed to be that God must not care about the struggles that most were facing.

This was the messy context in which Luke shares an amazing story of good news, news that's is good because it is revelatory and transformative. An angel named Gabriel goes to a teen-aged girl in order to have a conversation with her. After greeting her, the second thing the angel says to her addressing a where-is-God-in-this-mess environment is, "The Lord is with you." "The Lord is with you." That expression of good news is the basis for what else the angel says to the young woman named Mary. Since the Lord was with her, the angel's first words made more sense: "Greetings, favored one." Mary was not understood to have been a prominent person. She was poor. She was from an out-of-the-way place. She was far from being a person who was influential in any way. But it was accurate for an angel of the Lord to refer to her as 'favored one' because of the good news that the Lord was with her. That then made the third part of the angelic message more possible when Gabriel urged her: "Do not be afraid."

If you search online for paintings that interpret this annunciation scene, there are a lot of Renaissance paintings that show up. But a late-19th century painting by Henry Ossawa Turner that hangs in our own Philadelphia Museum of Art was one that caught my eye. The artist was the first African American artist to gain international acclaim. In the painting, Mary is young, relatively small, seemingly filled with trepidation and wonderment as she looks at a shaft of light which is a representation of the angel before her. Mary wears rumpled Middle Eastern peasant clothing. She has no halo. ² The picture makes me wonder when in the conversation that the depiction take place.

Luke tells us that after the angel says, "Greetings, favored one," then Mary is told that the Lord is with her and that she needn't be afraid. What comes next, the fourth part of the angel's message is an invitation for Mary to partner with God in an amazing initiative. God wants her to agree to an unprecedented pregnancy such that her child would not only be her son, but also God's son. It is an astounding invitation that would turn her life upside down. I can readily imagine young Mary considering responding to the angel, "No thanks!" Such a

reply might be shaped something like this: Wow! I am so honored that God would have this much confidence in me. I certainly support the redemptive initiative God wants to undertake to fulfill many gracious divine promises. However, I feel constrained to encourage you to keep searching as I don't think I am the right person for this particular job. My parents would not want me to take on too much and they worry about my reputation. I can think of others who are better suited for this task. With my upcoming marriage to Joseph and the need to establish a new home together, the timing is not so great for me. I am sure you understand. Please accept my apology. Even though I want to be God's humble servant, I need to pass on this offer.

Yet Mary doesn't say, "No," and God's great affirmative message gains a way to come to humanity in human form. Somehow, God enables Mary to say that she would do what God wanted which was to partner in God's plan to reveal anew a deep and redemptive love.

I frankly have a hard time contemplating a visit from an angel, but I can imagine a message that comes in response to a question about where God might be when things are in quite a mess. It is just such a message that comes as more good news to you and to me. Yes, the good news of the gospel continues, which is part of why it is such good news. You and I can also amazingly be considered favored by God, because God is with us in the midst of the mess we are in. God's presence offers us comfort and encouragement during a difficult time, but it does more than that. God is with us in a way that can overcome our fears, which opens the way for a divine partnership even with those of us without halos that can demonstrate divine love for all.

The good news story Luke told continues. God still comes to meet humans where we are. God still cares about the mess in which we find ourselves. And God still invites regular folks like you and me to join a divine initiative of compassion, love, grace, and hope. Similar to Mary, our lives won't be the same when God enables us to be more than spineless figures wilting over. Where is God in this big mess? The good news story Luke told continues and we have a part in it. Such good news! Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Based on a story by the Rev. Alan Sherouse.

² <https://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/104384.html>