

Bearing Jesus  
A sermon preached at  
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ)  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
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Take away the Angel Gabriel and Gabriel's announcement to Mary and what we have left is the story of a young woman embracing a call in her life. Only we can't take away the angel, or Luke's report that Gabriel had a message for Mary. This is precisely what the Harvard professors are telling us. When it comes to the important things we're called to do in our lives, we're talking mystery, a holy mystery. Unexpected experiences. Strange intercessors. Bizarre messages. Feelings of fear and confusion. Then, maybe, a new resolve. Like Mary.

Texts: Romans 16:25-27 & Luke 1:26-38

The story was reported in the *Denver Post*. I wish I had saved the article. It told of a professor who taught in one of our nation's prominent business schools. He has done extensive research into the depth of satisfaction that people find in their work. In the article, he pointed to the differences between having a job, having a career and having a vocation. We use these three terms interchangeably – job, career, vocation – but the professor argues that we shouldn't. Through his research, the professor discovered that *what* a person does for a living doesn't have nearly the affect in a person's life as the *way* that person perceives her work.

A job, he explained, is the basic way to describe our employment. It's the work we do to get a paycheck, to provide for ourselves and our loved ones. A career is a specific line of work that we've prepared for through extended training or by going to school. We get a job. We choose a career. In a job, we do what we're told. In a career, we help define the task. People who think of their employment as a job aren't as fulfilled – they aren't as physically healthy – as the people who, doing the same work, think of it as a career.

A vocation, however, is something altogether different. A vocation is what we do with our lives that makes a difference in the world. It has to do with our sense of calling. In fact, those doing the same work and who think of their employment as a calling, have a significantly higher sense of self and purpose and accomplishment. The professor found this to be true across the board. He has interviewed custodians, corporate executives, teachers, men and women working assembly lines, emergency personnel and store clerks.

He pointed to a hospital housekeeper who worked forty hours a week at a low wage. He said that unlike many of her co-workers she thought of her job as a vocation. She talked about the importance of her work, maintaining a clean and pleasant environment for the patients, having the opportunity to visit with them when everybody else – doctors, nurses, even the patient’s family – were too busy to chat. Not surprisingly, in exit interviews, patients singled her out. Some said she actually contributed to their healing.

This has been a big deal in the business world for some time now, researching the psychology of work and discovering how the choices people make about their employment affect their relationships, their sense of meaning and purpose as well as their success. You read some of the literature, it sounds religious. James Waldrop is a psychologist teaching at Harvard Business School (*Fast Company Magazine*, Feb., '98, p.108). He writes, “[The word] *vocation* comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means ‘to call.’ It suggests that you are listening for something that calls out to you, something that comes to you and is particular to you.” He could have gotten that definition from a theological dictionary.

His colleague at Harvard, Timothy Butler, adds, “A calling is something you have to listen for. You don’t hear it once and then immediately recognize it. You’ve got to attune yourself to the message.” They use words like *path* and *resistance* and *risky choices*. They talk about *internal tensions* between self-interest and serving others, between wanting security and taking risks, between living for today and investing in tomorrow, and how a growing awareness of one’s mortality becomes more and more a part of one’s decision-making in life. I think these guys could walk across the campus and teach in the seminary at Harvard.

What’s all this got to do with our Scripture text, with the angel Gabriel and the teenager Mary and preparation for our celebration of the birth of Jesus? A lot. This story speaks to our capacity to listen, with our need, as Butler the business psychologist preaches, to “attune ourselves” to the messages that come to us in life. Our reading from Luke’s Gospel has to do with our sense of vocation, our calling. Whether what we’re doing in our lives is just a kind of traipsing along from one moment, one task, to the next, merely surviving and providing or whether, by way of our experiences and the gains and losses along the way and the persons who have touched our lives, God might actually be calling us to something more, something deeper in our lives. Whether we have resigned ourselves to living lives of little significance or whether we’re open to the possibility that God may be calling us to do something big with our lives.

Take away the Angel Gabriel and Gabriel’s announcement and what we have left is the story of a young woman embracing a call in her life. Only we can’t take away the angel, or Luke’s report that Gabriel had a message for Mary. This is precisely what the Harvard professors are telling us. When it comes to the important things we’re called to do in our lives, we’re talking mystery, a holy mystery. Unexpected experiences. Strange intercessors. Bizarre messages. Feelings of fear and confusion. Then, maybe, a new resolve. Like Mary.

The account of Mary's call is described in thirteen short verses resolving quite nicely, beautifully, in her brief response to Gabriel. "Here am I," Mary says, "the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Sometimes it can happen like this. Every so often you hear a story: there was a terrible accident maybe; somebody's miraculously saved; they discern a message from God and embrace a new way of living. It can happen like that. More often, it's a long and sometimes painful process. I know folks in their 40s and 50s who are still struggling with their calling. I think there's a chance that Luke gives us a condensed version of Mary's call. I think this conversation could have unfolded over a longer period of time.

The text says that Mary was much perplexed. "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Can you imagine the look on her face? Gabriel speaks as if it's a done deal, as if Mary doesn't have a choice: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." But he sees her hesitancy. "He'll be great, Mary." "He'll be called the Son of the Most High." It's as if Gabriel has to talk her into it. "Mary, the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." Maybe it just takes some time for Mary to attune herself. "Your son, Mary, he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary finds her voice. She asserts herself. "How can this be?" she asks. Gabriel has to explain. It's as if Gabriel has to back up and admit that it's not a predetermined certainty. That he's been sent, not to tell Mary how it's going to be but to deliver an invitation not a demand from God.

Will Willimon, a Methodist bishop in Alabama, tells of a woman who'd been married to a pastor for fifteen years. One afternoon, she was sitting on her sofa in the parsonage, smoking a cigarette, drinking a beer, and reading some trashy novel she could have bought at the supermarket checkout line. Her husband walked in, the pastor, and said something to the effect, "You sure don't look like a pastor's wife." She shouted back, "I'm a wife, but not a pastor." That's the best she could come up with. She was trying to tell her husband to back off. But she told Willimon, later, that the moment the words had come out of her mouth, it was like a voice in her brain: "How do you know you are not called to be a pastor?" It was just a voice, she said. One year later – after a year of struggle – she entered seminary.

Please hear me when I say that it's not always about "going into the ministry" or even changing jobs. If that's what you're hearing, it'll be too easy for you to dismiss this story. You're calling right now could be, like Mary's, to be a good mother or father or the grandparent your grandchild really needs. I won't forget the phone call I got from an orthodontist in my last congregation. He'd led a crazy, dangerous life. Drugs, broken marriages, bankruptcies. Then he had a daughter, little Hannah. In his forties. That's when he decided to put things back together. At the invitation of a friend, he came to our church. He began listening, experiencing what the Harvard guys call the *internal tensions* between self-interest and serving others, between taking risks and wanting security, between living for today and investing in tomorrow, and how a growing awareness of one's mortality becomes more and more a part of one's decision-making in life. These are signs of the Holy Spirit. He said 'yes' to God. He didn't change his

career. He simply began to think of it as something more than making a lot of money. He made it his vocation, became better at it, discovered in it a way through to people – applying faith, not just braces. It wasn't just his work. He began to think of life itself as a calling. I was sitting in my office when he called on his cell phone to tell me he was driving down the Interstate, the top of his convertible rolled back, shouting praises to God.

Check me out on this. I think a lot of the busyness and confusion, the staleness and unresolved anger that mark our culture can be attributed to a sense within us – maybe we wouldn't put it this way; but it's the gnawing sense – that we are living an uncalled life. No sense of a higher purpose to our lives. There's nothing more deadening, devastating than never arriving at a sense of one's vocation, a sense of one's call from God – and nothing more exhilarating than when we do. You can dismiss the angel in Luke's account of Mary's annunciation. But most stories of annunciation, of discerning vocation, meaning and purpose, are just as mysterious. Because we're talking God here. We're talking about the unfolding of human history and our share in it. We're talking about an awareness of the importance of our lives, the meaning we discover in our usefulness to the world.

Mary was asked to bear the Lord of the Universe. I know how bizarre this sounds. Just as bizarre: God is inviting you and me to bear Jesus, too, to give birth to Jesus through the lives we live, the work we do, the relationships we form and nourish. It's big stuff. It's mysterious stuff. We're talking vocation here. Something you have to listen for. You don't hear it once, and then immediately recognize it. You've got to attune yourself. Maybe you've dismissed the voice – “too weird”, “not practical”, “too hard”, “family wouldn't understand”, “too risky” – or worse, maybe you think the time has passed for you. No. This is God's call to all of us: to bear the Living Christ in the work we do, the choices we make, the life we live.

Mary asked for all of us. “How can this be?” Gabriel put it like this. He said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

— Jeff Wright  
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