

The Reverend Craig T. Kocher
Acting Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life
Duke University Chapel
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Luke 1:26-28

Incarnation

Listening to Courtney read these words from Luke to us this morning, I'm struck again, as I have been all week, about how odd they seem. How out of place they sound, here, to us on a warm September morning. It's not that they are unfamiliar, on the contrary, they are some of the most familiar words in all of scripture, but they don't seem to fit quite right, not 103 days shy of Christmas. They are an interruption of our regular routine, taking us off guard, evoking thoughts of manger scenes, children's Christmas pageants, caroling and parties, milk and cookies. And yet, truth be told, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary those many years ago, chances are there was no snow on the ground. If Christian tradition gets it right, or is at least close with its claims that Jesus was born sometime around the winter solstice, or in our calendar, the end of December, then the weather during the time of the angel's visit to Mary may have been more like today's, sometime in late March or early April perhaps, maybe cooler than this balmy pre-fall morning, but certainly not in the cold dark of December when we are used to hearing this reading.

To us whose lives are ordered by a calendar, who know that fall break is a month away and Christmas not even a glimmer on the horizon, this scripture, this sermon on Mary, is an interruption in our normal routines, even here, in church where we read scripture and hear sermons every week. There may be those of you out there in the pews, who view any sermon as an interruption in an otherwise beautiful service of music, you would find favor with the musicians I work with, but especially a sermon on Mary at this time of year.

Mary is the capstone to our opening series on young heroic people in the Bible. For my money, there is not a more heroic figure in all of Christendom than young Mary. To preach on Mary as a Protestant minister is not an easy task. Most of us, having grown up Methodist or Lutheran or Presbyterian and we have the sneaking suspicion that Mary, at the end of the day, is actually . . . a Catholic. Whatever else we know about Catholics, we know they are devoted to Mary. At Notre Dame, that flagship of Roman Catholic higher education, when they played the University of Michigan in football yesterday in South Bend, there were T-shirts in the stands, as there are every week, saying, "God may not care who wins the football game, but his mother sure does." Or the story of the Baptist minister who died, went to heaven, and was met by Jesus himself. Jesus said, "you have preached well of my Father. May I introduce you to my mother." No, we Protestants know little about Mary outside of December manger scenes.

Here she is, her young life finally ordered out, betrothed, engaged that is to Joseph the Carpenter. Hers will be no life of extravagance, but it may be a good life, a somewhat more stable life at least as a craftsman's wife in Nazareth.

And then, totally unexpectedly, Mary's plans are invaded, interrupted, thrown off course in the wildest of directions. The angel Gabriel appears, and says "do not fear,"

and shares what we're told is good news with Mary. Looking over the biblical references to angels appearing, the Jewish theologian Elie Wiesel says that when an angel appears saying "Fear Not" you had better watch out, because a big assignment is on the way!

Mary is in a routine. She is engaged, there is much to be done, much to prepare for. Yet she is interrupted. Her ordered life is thrown off balance. Young Mary was no fool. She had taken intro to biology at Nazareth High. She knew what the angel was telling her was just a tad outside of the ordinary, and was going to set her up for a rather awkward conversation with Joseph, not to mention make her fodder for the Judean gossip circles. Mary doesn't merely say "Yes Lord," like some nativity scene coo-coo-clock. She knew the angel's message meant her life was to be turned inside out, totally re-oriented, all of her own dreams, plans, and goals would have to be cast aside. Mary is a poor peasant girl, and if the challenges of poverty and subsistence living were not difficult enough, she was now about to become an unwed teenage mother, who would give birth to a child, and that child would be executed as a criminal of the state some 30 years later.

Against this backdrop of her life, with dreams as big as any of our own, complexities as deep as any we might face, Mary's heroism comes in her willingness to say yes, to have her life interrupted, disrupted, thrown off balance by the word becoming flesh. In that moment of Mary's yes, she becomes the model for all Christians who would follow her. She is the first to quite literally receive Jesus into her life. Her Magnificat is not only the first hymn of praise, it is the first Christian sermon, proclaiming the good news of what God has done and will do in the world, especially for people like her, the poor, the lonely, the forgotten. For whatever controversy may have swirled around Mel Gibson's movie last spring, he got Mary right. She was no sexy Hollywood heroine, but rather a peasant girl, thirteen, fourteen years of age at the oldest, who suffered much for that historic interruption.

This interruption in Mary's life, we now have a word for it, we call it *incarnation*. Incarnation, a fancy word that means the word has become flesh. God who stands outside of all time interrupts the flow of time and becomes flesh, one of us, with us. John Wesley wrote, "what a wonderful thing to see, Mary's maker born, and nursed at her knee."

I haven't been at Duke Chapel very long, just over a year now, but there is one comment I have heard from students more than any other, it goes something like this: "I don't consider myself to be religious, but I am a spiritual person." I had a call from a graduate student the other day who is getting married in the Duke Gardens and asked if I would perform the service. I said, "the gardens are indeed beautiful, but why wouldn't you want to get married in the Chapel?" "Well," he said, "we don't want a religious wedding, we want a spiritual wedding. We don't want anything about Jesus, nothing from the Bible. We believe love is about a spiritual energy flowing between all things."

Here in the Chapel we believe something very different. We Christians have an incarnational faith, a tangible faith, a physical faith. For Christians there is no vast dichotomy between the spiritual world and the physical world, between spirituality and religion. Any spiritual energy that may flow in this world is embodied, practiced, worked out in flesh and blood. On that day the angel appeared to Mary, the spiritual invaded the physical and forever more, the two come together like child and womb. This is what we mean when we say, "sacrament," or "Communion," that God is fully present in the

physical stuff of the world, in everyday ordinary things like bread and wine. Jesus the word interrupts Mary's life, becomes flesh in her living, and God has been interrupting our ordered lives, in the flesh, ever since.

I remember back in the fall of 1999 when I was in Divinity School here at Duke and working as an intern in campus ministry with Jenny Copeland and the Wesley Fellowship. It was the fall of that year the Eastern part of North Carolina looked a lot like modern-day Southern Florida or Western North Carolina. A couple of hurricanes had scoured the land and people to our east. One night, soon after the rain subsided, in our campus ministry planning session, one of the seniors spoke up, and said, "Are you all aware of what has happened an hour and a half east of us? Half the state is underwater. People have lost their homes. They are in desperate need of aid, of help. We're Christians, we've got to go; we've got to help!" And just like that, this student, no voice from above, just a student in flesh and blood sitting across the circle from us, had interrupted our weekend plans, changed things all around; my palm pilot said nothing about hurricane relief that weekend. A couple of days later, instead of enjoying the football game, we were off to Rocky Mount. This was no spiritual energy chain of love, this was hot, sweaty, Christian labor, digging mud out of strangers' houses, pulling up water logged carpet. This was incarnational work, being physically present, at a specific place in a specific time.

More often than not, that is the way God is at work in the world, in physical kind of way. Your hall mate knocks on the door, and says "may I come in." You're deep in a study session for the next day's Chemistry exam, but you can see in his eyes, he's been crying again, and so you change your plans, put the book down and say "yes" what's wrong? The doctor walks into the waiting room. He says your unborn child has Down syndrome, and in an instant all your ordered expectations change, they're thrown up in the air.

She showed up at my office door one afternoon last fall. It had been a long day already and now it was late in the evening, most everyone had gone home, and I was just getting things in order to walk out. "I need to speak with a pastor," she said. I took a quick glance around the basement hunting for backup, but seeing none, I said, "How may I help you?" "I'm a freshman," said the young woman. "I've been a spiritual person all my life, never religious at all, and to tell you the truth have never really believed in God. But this morning I walked into this Chapel. I'd always been a bit afraid of it, being so big and imposing, and intimidating. I sat there for a while in the silence and then, not knowing what else to do, I spoke to God. He didn't talk back or anything, and so I got up and headed to my religion class over in the divinity school. But on the way to class I passed a little chapel, and I heard the most beautiful music. I poked my head in. It was warm and light, they were singing together and praying together, and seemed to genuinely love each other. Then all of a sudden my RA grabbed my hand and she pulled me in. Before I knew it I was being given some bread and wine and I stood there in the middle of those strangers and just began to weep. I've never experienced anything like that before. Do you suppose that was God?" I said, "Let me get this straight. You prayed to God in this chapel, by yourself, and nothing happened, and then you left, back in your regular routine, on the way to class, when someone physically grabbed you, pulled you into a room where there are people, singing, and praying, they give you

communion, you started weeping?” “Yeah,” I said, “that sounds like something God would do.” Amen.