
Mexican Wave

Luke 1. 26-38

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 18 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

In 1986 the soccer World Cup was held in Mexico. Sadly, the USA didn't qualify. The tournament is best remembered for bringing to a world audience that communal activity beloved of stadium crowds, the Mexican Wave. The phenomenon is said to have begun at a Californian baseball game in the early 80s. So you could say it's another product that America outsourced south of the border. In the US it's just called 'The Wave' because calling it a Mexican Wave might affect the balance of trade figures. These days the crowds who start a Mexican Wave tend to be either very young or very bored. Looking at the crowd we've got in the Chapel today, you're clearly not very young, so if I see a Mexican Wave starting I'll know you're getting pretty bored and I'll get the message that it's time I gave the sermons a rest for a while and put Craig on a bit more often.

I want you to imagine the Old Testament as a Mexican Wave, and that each major development in the story is like that wave reaching a new part of the crowd, with its own cheer. If this was an elementary school I'd now divide you into sections, but I'm going to resist that temptation and leave it to your imagination. The way the first half of the Old Testament is written, it's all leading somewhere. The cheer gets louder and louder until it reaches a climax.

It starts with the story of God in Genesis 1 saying Let there be light. Let's call this part number one. This is a story about the sheer power of God's word to bring something out of nothing. God just says the word, and says 'Let it Be'. And it is. And all is good. Then there is the story of Adam and Eve. We'll call this number two. This is a story about how God longs for us to be his friends, and how he makes everything possible for us to keep that friendship. But it is also a story about how first the woman, then the man, disobey God.

The next major part of the story which I'll call number three is the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, sometimes known as the patriarchs. God calls Abraham and says he will have as many descendants as the stars in the sky and they will be a blessing to all peoples. And God changes Jacob's name to Israel, and renews the covenant with him, even though Jacob isn't much of a role model.

And then the next part, which we'll call number four, is Moses, when God intervenes in history to set his people free and gives them the law to make them holy, set apart for him. Moses is the key intermediary between God and his people, the one who gives the law to Israel. And the law, written on two stone tablets and kept in a container known as the ark of the covenant, which itself was kept for a long time in a tent, that law was considered the embodiment of God's presence among his people and his commitment to them.

And number five, which we could call the climax of the Mexican Wave, where the cheering gets loudest and the waving becomes more frenzied, is David. In David all the vital pieces seem to be in place. Israel has the Promised Land, and is safe within its borders. It has a capital city, Jerusalem, conquered by David. It has a king, and a king to be proud of. It certainly appears to have God's favor. And this seems to be the right time to crown that favor by building a Temple, a true place for the glory of God to dwell among his people. Nathan the prophet and David the king have a debate about this, and the conclusion seems to be that the house that God is establishing is not a physical one but a fleshly one – not one built out of cedar wood but one that follows David's descendants. And there is a new departure in this story in 2 Samuel 7. No longer does God say 'If you keep my covenant I will be your God.' There are no longer any 'ifs' in this relationship. 'Your throne shall be established forever', says God. No small print. No get-out clauses. You know what they say about the traditional breakfast of fried eggs and bacon? – The chicken's involved, but the pig's committed. Well here God moves from being a chicken to being a pig. God is committed to Israel. No ifs or buts. That's what makes today's Old Testament passage so important. It really is the high water mark of the whole story.

And then it all falls apart. After David's son Solomon dies, the kingdom splits, foreign powers invade, and Israel goes into exile, losing land, city, king, Temple and most of all favor. Catastrophe. After the return from exile there is a hint of a new era, which we could call number six. This is the era of prophecy, when in the books that lie towards the end of our Old Testament, prophets began to talk of one coming who would change, restore, transform. But the prophets

fell silent, and the Mexican Wave fizzled out. The Israelites were back in their land, back in their city, and even had a new Temple, but it wasn't the same, because they had no king, no David.

And that's where Luke's gospel begins. Imagine the Mexican Wave doesn't take place in a stadium with seating all around, but in an arena more like the football stadium here at Duke, where it goes about four-fifths of the way around. The Wave dies out as the prophets fall silent, right where the seating comes to an end. And Luke begins at that very point, with the promised – you could say prophesied – birth of a new prophet, a big time prophet proclaiming some mighty big news. And just imagine those lethargic sports fans, amongst whom the Wave had died out, just stirring to their feet, almost in slow motion. Section six is rising to its feet, but it's not yet clear whether it's a yawn or in celebration.

But wait, look, here, later in Luke chapter one, here are these words, 'Greetings, favored one.' Sound familiar? We haven't heard anything about being favored since the time of David. And look, there's more about David. 'He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.' This is beginning to sound like section five rising to its feet. Suddenly we're hearing 'forever' language again, for the first time for a thousand years. This is section five, the David section, beginning to stand and wave their hands and cheer. The Wave is reviving, and going back the way it came.

Section four, the Moses section, is a bit more subtle. You need to think about what Mary is doing in this story. She is being summoned by God to play a vital role in giving to Israel the complete embodiment of God's renewed covenant. There is an exact analogy between what Mary is doing and what Moses once did. And the signal is the word 'holy'. 'Therefore the child to be born will be holy'. 'Holy' is a word that points directly to Moses, because the whole notion of holiness comes into the Bible with Moses, beginning at the burning bush and centering on Mount Sinai, and the declaration that Israel will be a holy nation just as Yhwh is a holy God. So the Mexican Wave is now really on the move: the prophets are coming back, David is coming back, Moses is here too.

And so on to section three, and now it's getting pretty exciting. If you remember the movie the Blues Brothers, you'll know how the two boys go round all their old mates, the oldest swingers in town, and mutter the stirring words, 'We're getting the band back together'. That's what's happening here. Luke's account of the annunciation is going back through the main sections of the Old Testament getting the band back together. Next in line is section three, the patriarchs. Gabriel says, 'He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' So this new initiative from God embraces not just the hope of David, the hope of a new king; not just Moses, the hope of a renewed covenant that puts the heart of God back among his people in a way that had not been since the ark of the covenant was lost in the fall of Jerusalem 600 years before Mary was born; not just David, not just Moses, but God's initiative embraces even Jacob, in other words it goes back to the beginning of Israel's story, back to the blessing to every nation and the call of Abraham himself.

But there's even more. The crowds are now making a terrific noise, because section two is on its feet. And section two you'll remember is the Garden of Eden, and the story of the woman who disobeyed. And here we are again at a crucial moment in the Biblical narrative and this time the woman says yes. 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord.' Think about what it means to be a servant in the ancient world. It means to live in the house of your master and be around him all the time. So the friendship with God that was abrogated in the Garden of Eden is well on the way to being restored. Mary is now a member of God's household. Mary has taken a step beyond the scope of Israel. This is a step that goes back even before Abraham. It is a step towards the reconciliation of the whole of humanity with God.

And we haven't finished yet. There's one more section to rise to its feet. Genesis 1 itself. 'Let it be to me according to your word', says Mary. This is the language of the great creation story. Not only does Mary say 'Let it be', the same words God uses to speak the world and the universe into being; she also refers to 'your word', the Word of God, the word God spoke and the heart of his creative power. And if there should be any doubt that this is a reference to the first creation story, look at the way the baby is to be conceived: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'. Here is a direct echo of those early verses of the creation account. I once heard a lector read from the first words of the Bible, 'the earth was formless and void, and darkness covered the face of the Abyss'. It certainly changed the way I think about convents. But even that lector got the next words right: 'the spirit hovered over the face of the waters'. And that's what happens here: the Spirit hovers over Mary. And there is a new

creation. The story of the coming child embraces not just the reconciliation of the whole of humanity but the renewal of the whole universe. We're talking about a new heaven and a new earth. The whole of the Old Testament is about to be fulfilled in this young woman's womb.

So each one of the six sections of the great stadium has risen to its feet in a growing crescendo of joy and celebration. Gabriel's message to Mary is an announcement without precedent. The angel is saying, this is a new David, God wholly committed to us with no ifs or buts. This is a new Moses, God fully embodied among us and setting us free, making his tent with us and being visible among us. This is a new Jacob, a promise that does not depend on our worthiness or unworthiness but extends to all God's people as a blessing for every nation. This is a new Adam and Eve, a new obedient relationship that sets right God's friendship with the whole of humanity. And this is a new creation, the Spirit once again hovering as the word of God makes the impossible possible and brings light out of darkness.

Luke is telling us that wherever we stand in the stadium, it's time to rise to our feet. We may be standing in the prophets section, down in the dumps and longing for a sign or a leader to promise a change in our fortunes. We may be in the David section, deeply aware of promises that sounded so sweet but seem to have been cruelly broken, lost in regret or bitterness or nostalgia. We may be in the Moses section, longing for God to be close to us, to give us clear instruction and a sense of what it means for us to live a holy life. We may be in the Jacob section, knowing how foolish and cruel we can be and wondering if God has any patience or mercy left for us. We may be in the Adam and Eve section, wondering if one terrible mistake has ruined our whole lives. We may be in section one, the creation section, wondering what is the meaning of the universe, and troubled by the way humanity is squandering the heritage of the planet's equilibrium.

Whichever of the six sections we're in, we may have had plenty of reasons to stop the Wave. But Gabriel's words to Mary shake us out of our boredom, our sadness, and our skepticism. Behold. The Lord is with you. It's time to stop yawning, stop crying, stop worrying about being embarrassed, and get up on your feet, celebrate and wave your arms high. For here is a new king, a new presence, a new covenant, a new friendship, a new creation. God is coming home to us, and bringing us home to him.