

Love is a flame that burns in our heart,
Jesus has come and will never depart.
When God is a child there's joy in our song.
The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong,
And none shall be afraid.
(When God is a Child' vs. 4 by Brian Wren)

Luke 1:16-38
The Annunciation



“Smuggling The Holy Into the World”

“We love because God first loved us.”

1 John 4:19

‘In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary in Nazareth . . . (Luke 1:26).’ If Gabriel looked anything like the way in which my eight year old grandson pictures angels then Mary must have been terrified. Let me explain. When his Sunday school was given the assignment of making angel ornaments for their Christmas tree, Wyatt designed a green vested, three headed, vampire fanged angel with a bright red blood spurt running down its chest. Trying to look on the bright-side of her son’s culturally influenced Biblical character his mother said: “I don’t think this was exactly what his teacher had in mind, but I think it adds an interesting contrast to the rest of our Christmas ornaments. The blood spurts are a nice touch and the color coordinates with the season.” In response I said to her, “So what character in the Christmas pageant does Wyatt want to play this year?” Without hesitation she knowingly replied: “Probably a vampire sheep. Or maybe a zombie wise man.”

‘ . . . and Gabriel said to Mary, “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words’ Apparently blood sucking vampire angels did not populate the faith imagination of Mary’s teenage mind for when Gabriel showed up, bewilderment rather than fear overcame her. She had never seen an angel before but she had heard that they were heavenly beings sent to Jews with messages from God. Puzzled, she began to wonder what the message might be. But before unknowing allowed fear to enter her thoughts, faith interrupted with the speaking of God’s Word. ‘The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you are favored with God. For you will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-35). Gabriel’s mention of David reminded her of the time that the king wanted to build a temple for the Lord but God said

'no'. What the Lord chose to do instead was to change up the terms of the covenantal relationship between God and God's children. The Holy One of Israel made this promise to king David: 'Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me, your throne will be established forever' (2 Sam. 7:16). In this historical moment of faith, God added a new promise to The Holy One's covenantal relationship with Israel. The Lord promised to house the power and glory of God in leaders born from David's lineage rather than in an ark or temple. Over the years, however, subsequent kings lost faith in the promise and the nation collapsed. By Mary's time the royal dynasty had become a historical footnote; the city of Jerusalem had ceased to shine with God's glory; Jews were oppressed under Roman authority; citizens were fearful of Empire might. So, when Gabriel visited Mary the possibility of a leader being born from the house of David who could save them from their situation was a long shot at best. But among some Jews however, it remained deep down in their bones as Messianic faith.

'Mary said to Gabriel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34) To which God's messenger replied: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you; there the child to be born will be holy and he shall be called Son of God' (Luke 1:35). When Gabriel announced it this time, Mary's heart heard something more . . . when faith raised that turn the world upside-down question: Could God be incarnating the saving power of love by becoming Emmanuel (God with us) in Jesus, her Holy conceived baby? In his book, 'One Incredible Moment' author Max Lucado imagines "Love's Remarkable Plan" which underlies Incarnation Faith.

Seated at the great desk, the Author opens the large book. It has no words. It has no words because no words exist. No words exist because no words are needed. There are no words to hear them, no eyes to read them. The Author is alone. And so the Author takes the great pen and begins to write. Like an artist gathers colors and a woodcarver tools, the Author assembles words. There are three. Three single words. Out of these three will pour a million thoughts. But on these three words the story will suspend. The Author takes the quill

and spells the first. T-I-M-E. Time did not exist until the Author wrote it. The Author is timeless, but the story would be encased in time. The story would have a first rising of the sun, a first shifting of the sand. A beginning. . .and an end. A final chapter. The author knows it before writing it. Time. A footspan on eternity's trail. Slowly, tenderly, the Author writes the second word. A name. A-D-A-M. As the Author writes, the Creator sees him, the first Adam. Then the writer sees all of the others. In a thousand eras in a thousand lands, the Author sees them. Each Adam. Each child. Instantly loved. Permanently loved. To each the Author assigns a time. To each the author appoints a place. No accidents. No coincidences. Just design. The Author makes a promise to these unborn. In my image I will make you. You will be like me. You will laugh. You will create. You will never die. And you will write. They must. For a book is a book, not to be read, but rather a story to be written. The Author starts each life story, but each life will write his or her own ending. What a dangerous liberty. How much safer it would have been to finish the story for each Adam. To script every option. It would have been simpler. It would have been safer. But it would not have been love. Love is only love if chosen. So the Author decides to give each child a pen. "Write carefully" the Maker whispers. Lovingly deliberately, the Author writes a third word, already feeling the pain. E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L. The greatest mind in the universe imagined time. The truest judge granted Adam a choice. But it was love that gave Emmanuel, God with us. The Author would enter his own story.

'While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground, an angel of the Lord came round and glory shone around' (verse one from the hymn). When the time came, Wyatt chose to be a shepherd. He wore a green and white head covering and carried a cuddly looking sheep. From the perplexed smile on his face, I'm thinking that when it came to the part in the story when the angels visited the shepherds, the image of the three-headed vampire did not appear to terrify him. What came to his mind instead, was the face of baby Jesus happy at being born. And like the Grinch who stole Christmas, the flame of love fired up within his soul and his heart grew three sizes as he sang happy birthday to Jesus that day.