



Sermon, December 1, 2019
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Cottage Grove and Junction City
United Methodist Churches

Interview with an Angel

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Host

Good morning, good morning! Welcome to the Sunday Show. This morning we have a very special guest with us. Every year about this time, stores and radios begin playing Christmas carols and songs about babies in mangers, angels and shepherds and so on. Or driving down the street you might see little figures on peoples' lawns with sheep, cattle, camels, and people dressed like refugees from a costume party. But have you ever wondered just what the story is behind all these songs and decorations? Who are these people, and how did they come to be on our greeting cards, our lawns and in our loudspeakers? To help us answer this question we have with us someone who, you might say, had a hand in starting it all – who was there at the beginning of the story – please give it up for the Archangel Gabriel!

(Gabriel walks in, acknowledging the applause and sits in chair. He is dressed in a business suit, with an FTD emblem)

Well, good morning, Mr. Gabriel, sir. Can we call you Gabe, for short?

Gabriel

No.

Host

I see, okay. Well, I must say I am a bit surprised to see you in a business suit.

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Gabriel

What's so surprising? I'm an Archangel, the CEO in charge of Earthly Communications.

Host

I see. And the FTD emblem on your jacket there...?

Gabriel

That's for when you care to send the very best – you send me.

Host

(Quickly moving on)

So! Mr. Gabriel, Sir, you are credited with delivering 2 very important messages in the regions of Galilee and Judea about 2000 years ago, more or less, is this correct?

Gabriel

I presume you are talking about the Zechariah of Jerusalem and Miriam of Nazareth incidents?

Host

Yes, I believe so.

Gabriel

You know, let me begin by saying this. When the Commander-in-Chief called me in for these 2 assignments, I had to register my misgivings about the whole enterprise. Humans are so cowardly, fickle, undependable, and, frankly, dense. You know, thick in the head? And easily impressed by a good show, you, know what I mean?

Host

Not really. What do you mean?

Gabriel

Well, you show up in a blaze of light, a flurry of wings, a whirlwind, a blazing bush, you name it, and people's jaws drop and they just stand

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there staring, or more often than not, drop in a dead faint. With the right smoke and mirrors you can do most anything.

Host

Hmmm, that explains most political campaigns.

Gabriel

My point exactly. Take the Zechariah case. I was sent to deliver the good news to Zechariah that his wife's prayers had been answered and that he was going to bear a son. I decided to approach him when he was serving in the temple. Now here's the thing. You are serving in the Temple of God, right? The place where God's Shekinah Presence you would expect to find, right? The Temple is a holy place, right?

Host

Right....

Gabriel

So I go there, blaze of light, flurry of wings, probably some wind blowing around the altar, and you know what Zechariah does?

Host

No.

Gabriel

He faints! I tell God, "Hey, this isn't going to work. Whenever I appear, people faint. They're too weak to carry out your scheme here. They're cowardly, they have divided loyalties or they're in it to get rich. You can't depend on humans. This is a job for trained professionals. Listen, I'm in charge of several legions of angels. We'll come in with blazing swords, we'll level the earth, and that'll put the Fear of God in them.

Host

I suppose it would. So, what did God say?

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Gabriel

God wouldn't have anything to do with it. No, the plans were very specific: Birth as a completely human baby in the normal fashion, somewhere in the tooleydoos of Galilee and grow up like any backwater kid. He needed an emissary or "preparer of the way," a front man, I guess, so we helped Elizabeth conceive his cousin, John.

Host

So you went to tell Zechariah about all of this and he fainted?

Gabriel

He didn't believe me. Here I am, fresh from the throne of God, dressed in full messenger regalia, appearing to him behind closed doors, no other way to get in, and he doesn't believe my message. I'm telling you, I'm in the middle of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, for heaven's sake - which is the point, by the way.

Host

So what happened next?

Gabriel

So he's standing there stammering and yammering, and I say, fine, be that way. You think you're incoherent now, I'll give you the next 9 months to come up with a reply. Until then, silence. Give him time to think it over.

Host

Seems a bit extreme.

Gabriel

Aaaa, you're dealing with humans. The obvious escapes them. You've got to do extreme things even to get their attention.

Host

So tell me about Mary, er, Miriam of Nazareth. How did that go?

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Gabriel

Yeah, well, now that was an interesting one. You see, I had to meet her at her house. So, she was out hanging up the laundry. I show up, flash of light, flurry of wings, breeze blowing the laundry around, the usual drill. I say to her, "Hail Mary!"

Host

And what happened?

Gabriel

What do you expect? She fainted. I said, "God, here we go again. Look, maybe this isn't such a good plan. I mean, she's only what, maybe sixteen? She's young, she's inexperienced, she's innocent, she's really still only a girl, what does she know about the world, she can't understand the ramifications. Besides, she's going to run screaming when I tell her what's up."

Host

But God didn't have any of it, right?

Gabriel

So, what's this – you reading ahead? Yeah, God says stay the course. So, I stand there cooling my heels. Mary comes to. I try a more formal approach. I clear my throat and say, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." She faints again.

I say, "God, she isn't going to want to do this. This is way beyond her. She's just a poor little peasant girl. You need to find some heroine like Xena the warrior princess, someone who is used to taking on impossible chances." Just then, Mary awakens. I continue: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son..." Mary faints.

I say, "God, this isn't going to work." You see, Mary was crucial to the whole enterprise. If she said, No," then the whole gig was up.

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Host

Couldn't God just make her say yes? You know, like "Let there be light!"
Zam! Kapow! Mary gets hit right between the eyes!

Gabriel

Good heavens, no! What kind of theology are you working with? God doesn't work like that. Human free will is inviolate. One of your poets, W. H. Auden, has a nice way of putting this whole thing: "Child it is in your power of choosing to choose the child who chooses you." It's all about choosing. That's what's scary about humans, the power of choice.

Host

So it all hung in the balance there in that backyard in Nazareth, while you talked with Mary, then? What happened next?

Gabriel

Mary awakens. I think to myself, Hang on Mary, I'm going to get this all out, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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."

Host

Yeah? And what happened next?

Gabriel

Well, I'm standing there waiting for her to faint. Mary doesn't faint. She looks right at me like she's some kind of prosecutor. "How will this be since I am a virgin?" she asks me. I think to myself, Ha! This will get her. Let's see what she does with this: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

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Host

And???

Gabriel

There was this long pause. Then she says, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." I stand there blinking. I say to her, "What?" She says, "Yes. I'm in." Just like that.

Host

And then what happened?

Gabriel

I'd rather not talk about it.

Host

No, I'm serious. What happened next?

Gabriel

(Stands and starts to leave)

It's kind of embar... no it's not really..

Host

Come on, after everything you were worried about, what happened next?

Gabriel

(Long pause) I fainted. (Exits)

Host

(Applauding) Well, there you have it: the Archangel Gabriel. Thank you for tuning in, and join us next week when we'll have as our guest: Elizabeth, cousin of Mary! Have a blessed week!