

Luke 1: 26-38
Creekside COB
December 21, 2008
Advent 4

“The Indwelling Face”

On my way back from preaching at Timbercrest on Tuesday, I drove through a little dot on the map called, Sidney. Just before the old elementary school that is now a flea market, I glanced at one of those. *“Hometown of...”* signs seen on the outskirts of cities, towns and villages. I was going too fast to read it, but I remembered that Sidney is the hometown of Gene Lichens, the Manchester College grad who is the renowned environmental scientist who discovered acid rain and wrote “the” book on its detrimental impact to our environment.

As you enter my hometown of Marion, Ohio there is an Ohio-shaped sign that reads, “Hometown of Warren G. Harding, the 29th President of the United States.” There is no footnote, however, that says he was also a scoundrel and a womanizer.

A sign outside of Wapakoneta, Ohio reads, “Hometown of Neal Armstrong, the first man on the moon.” A sign outside of French Lick, Indiana reads, “Hometown of basketball legend, Larry Bird.”

Towns that can’t claim famous people or historic events find other reasons to boast. Think of all the signs that read, “Home of State Champion Class AAA Football Team.” Towns with no famous people, historic events, or sports programs must be more resourceful. Rose Hill, North Carolina is home to the world’s largest frying pan. Bucyrus, Ohio is the self-proclaimed *“The Bratwurst Capital of America.”* New Auburn, Wisconsin’s sign reads, *“We’re Halfway Between the North Pole and the Equator.”* I recall a little town that boasted, “Home to Not Much of Anything.”

Nazareth was like that. Nazareth had no reason to boast. You may remember what people said when they heard where Jesus was from—*“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”* It was just a bump on the arid landscape where people lived as they had for centuries. No one expected that Nazareth would be *ground zero* for the beginning of a human-divine drama.

In Nazareth there lived a quiet young woman no older than thirteen or fourteen. She was no different from other girls her age. Her father had “arranged” her betrothal to an older man. She was anxious about it, but there was nothing to do but accept the arrangement. At least her life would be predictable. She would marry, and leave her home and family to live with her husband. She would bear children, cook, clean, sew and pick up the kids from soccer practice. She “let it be unto her according to tradition.”

No one could have imagined that she had been chosen to give birth to what the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick called, *“the most decisive baby in the world.”* There was no way of knowing that 2,000 years later she would be remembered as, “Mary the Mother of God,” or that her gold-leafed figure would keep watch above Notre Dame’s golden dome.

God was weary of waiting for us to come to him, so God called the angel Gabriel to announce a change of strategy. “Go to Nazareth and find a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph.” Gabriel found Mary sitting by a lamp addressing wedding invitations. He hovered before her and said, *“Hail, O favored One, the Lord is with you!”* How would you react if you were balancing your checkbook and a shimmering, luminous being appeared out of nowhere and said, *“Hail, favored one. Have I got something for you!”* You would either scream or melt because you would be too petrified to run.

“God’s got a plan, Mary, and you are part of it! Don’t be afraid. Gabriel You have found favor with God. You will conceive, bear a son, and name him Jesus.” Finding favor with God. God’s favors don’t seem favorable. God’s favors complicate life. Many figures in the Bible tried to defend themselves Against God’s

call. *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”* Moses protested. *“The Egyptians won’t listen to me.”* God picked Jeremiah to be a prophet, and Jeremiah said, *“You don’t want me. I’m just a kid! I have taken speech yet!”*

God doesn’t pick helpers with great resumes. When God has a task, God calls the inexperienced, the unqualified, folks without credentials. God does it this way so there is no confusion that the work is God’s, not ours, and the power by which it will be done is God’s, and not ours.

Picture Mary on her knees before Gabriel and his great, unfurled wings. He doesn’t ask here if she would like to try out for the part. He doesn’t say, “Think it over and I’ll get back to you.” He doesn’t ask if she is willing. He calls her blessed. He tells her not to be afraid. He tells her she will bear God’s son and not to worry about the “virginity thing” because nothing is impossible with God, and that Joseph will accept the situation—eventually. It wouldn’t be easy, but it would work out because Gabriel promised Mary, “The power of the most high will overshadow you.”

Mary did not behave like Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah or the others who fought their selection. She didn’t tell Gabriel, “Thanks, but no thanks.” She gave no excuses, or pragmatic reasons to say no. *“Let it be unto me according to your word,”* Mary replied. *“Count me in.”*

Lauren Winner said, *“These good tidings Gabriel brings are tidings of a lifetime of interruptions.”* Phyllis Carter once told me that ministry is about learning to deal with interruptions. That sounded disconcerting to me.

When I make plans I stick to them. When I’m engrossed in something, I don’t want to be bothered. “Tell them to call back later. I’m busy.” It didn’t take me long to realize that ministry *IS* interruptions. Ministry is learning to set aside my agenda to tend to something that may well be on God’s agenda in that moment.

A son was born to Lewis and Ruth Bibbee in July 1953. As I slipped from the womb I let out my first cry to announce that I had come to interrupt their lives. Nothing would be the same for them. They didn't take their first look at me and say, "Now we did it. How are we supposed to take care of this kid the next eighteen years?" At least I hope they didn't say that.

My life was going according to plan. Then my Mom's cancer returned. I hadn't planned on taking care of my mother the last six months of her life. Years before I thought about the possibility, and concluded, "There is no way I could do that." Cancer intruded upon Mom's life and mine, and an interesting thing happened. I never once thought, "I can't do it!" There was no question that I *would* do it. Mom's illness created a lot of upheaval. The future seemed up for grabs. But the power of the Most High overshadowed me.

I realized that it wasn't "THE" interruption of the disease and Mom moving in with me that was the issue. It was all of the little unanticipated interruptions. "I know you're busy, but the doctor's office called and said a prescription was phoned in for me. Could you get it now?" "You've been gone doing church business every night this week. Why don't you stay home and tell them to have the board meeting without you?"

Mary responded to God in obedience and great humility. I wish I would consistently do the same, but I don't. I've got important matters to take care of today. Time is precious, and I can't afford to let anyone or anything waste it. Then the phone rings. A salesman shows up. Someone says, 'You better visit Mrs. Thorn-In-the-Flesh. She's upset about something you said in a sermon.'" Substitute your own version of interruptions and you'll know what I mean.

"*Let it be unto me,*" is a humble recognition that our time is not our own. Our issues don't matter much alongside the issues that matter to God. When God dwells within us, our perspectives get messed up. Things no one cares about become our priorities. Looking away from broken people and the situations that broke

them is no longer an option. Having said yes to God's kingdom, we say no to the Empire in which we live.

Wednesday was one of those days when nothing went right. I was focused on finishing a writing project when someone came to the door. I walked to the door I saw a black man standing outside the entrance. "How can I help you?" I asked. "Are you the pastor... and the Sunday school teacher and the Bible study leader and the deacon and the counselor and the janitor of this church?" "I'm the guy," I replied.

Jerry is his name. He is the pastor a small church on Oakland Avenue. He wanted to ask some questions about our building and take a tour. I could spare ten or fifteen minutes, but it turned into an hour and a half. The discussion drifted from the church building to church people and the trials and triumphs of ministry. We soon realized we have the same members who change their names and race and go from one church to the other. He also talked about his struggles since his wife died two years ago.

As we walked the hall he looked into the primary class and said, "My grandkids would love this room. I have four of them at Concord East Side."

"Mrs. Fritz is their principal." "How do you know that?" "She's a church member," I replied. Jerry said, "She's a fine lady. I've had to talk with her about the behavior of my grandkids."

"Where do you live?" I asked. "56863 County Road 13." "Really? I live at 56559 CR 13." "Really? Jerry said. "You live ten houses from me and my son lives across the street from you." He asked if I live in the house Bruce Barwick built. "Yes, I do," I replied. "I've know Bruce for years. He's a good builder and a fine man." "I know," I said. "He's also a member of our church." "This is unreal," he laughed.

We walked into the office where Norma Miller was covering the phone. "Should I know you?" he asked. "You look so familiar.

Where did you work? Norma replied, “I used to work at a dry cleaners.” “Was it the cleaners that had a robbery about twenty-five years ago?” Norma looked surprised and said, “Yes... but how do you remember that?” “Easy,” he said. “They stole my wife’s mink coat!”

Then our conversation turned to the realm of speculation. “What would you think about our churches doing something together?” “I sounds great to me,” I responded. “We could use some help with engaging our bodies in worship and not just our heads. We have a lot to learn about outreach, too. You see, we like to talk about it, but don’t get around to doing it. You could be our teachers.” Anyone interested?

God showed me that my plans weren’t more important than his. We typically don’t think this way, but the birth is Jesus isn’t the only reason we should be merry at Christmas. It is Merry because Mary teaches us the value of allowing ourselves to be interrupted.