

(Luke 1:26-56 NRSV)

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." <sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

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## Surrender's Irony

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,  
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Text: Luke 1:26-56

What is the greatest Christian Holy day? Is it Easter, that glorious morning when Jesus burst the bonds of death? Is it Pentecost? There's good argument for Pentecost. There were Jesus' followers, still languishing and directionless after his death, and then that wind and flame stirred their hearts and gathered them into the church. Or is the greatest Christian Holiday Christmas, that moment in the stable when God became more human and humanity more divine? I suppose you could debate the merits of each one. But in the end, I think it best to take them in, each fully, as they come. So, as we celebrate this time of Christmas, I boldly make the claim that this is the most important Christian Holy day. In April I will say it is Easter, but today I say it is Christmas.

This is the day that God came among us, Emmanuel. And not just among us, but joined us. As we say in our communion service, Jesus came among us and shared the joys and sorrows of human life. There is something trustworthy about a God who knows our experience first hand. I am more persuaded when God, who has known fear, tells me to fear not. I am more convinced of the promise of peace from a God who has experienced chaos and conflict, as Jesus did. God's presence, come in the heart-warming story of the manger, the angels, the shepherds, the star, and the Magi, is a big story.

Peter Meek, my good friend and the minister at Hancock Church in Lexington, has reminded me that in C.S. Lewis's last volume in the *Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle*, the protagonists come to a stable, which from the outside is nothing much. But once inside it opens up into infinity. It contains everything. The stable of Christmas is surely like that, bigger on the inside than it looks from the outside. And each year the story of Christmas draws us in, for we sense that its meaning is bigger and deeper and more profound than we can express. We are asked to submit to its spell, and in so doing we enter God's infinity.

Now, you know there are those who think the story of Christmas and submitting to its magic is a bad idea. And I'm not just talking about those who find all of religion to be frivolous. I'm not talking about the Scrooge's and the atheists. I'm talking about confirmed, confessing Christians who think the tender story of the

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babe wrapped in swaddling cloths is all sentimentality, a stumbling block, and that we should better understand the real Jesus who eats with sinners, snipes at Pharisees, and threatens to destroy the temple. These offended Christians fear that the feel-good potential of Christmas will distract us from the difficult and challenging work that Christianity really demands.

Their fears are understandable. After all, there are plenty who come to the church just for the feel good days, like Christmas and Easter. The fears of the Christmas skeptics are understandable. They are understandable, but they are dead wrong.

Christmas is all about falling under its spell, all about walking into the infinity of it, all about being captivated by its simple immensity.

Surrender is the word which comes to mind. Surrender, also, is problematic in the circles which want us to be sure to take up the hard demands of the Christian faith. Surrender is passive, they say. Surrender sounds too much like acceptance, and acceptance sounds too much like apathy. Surrendering to God, they say, is an excuse for indifference, they say. AA members know better. They know the incredible and ironic power to change that comes from turning things over to God.

Mary knows, too. In the face of an announcement too perplexing to grasp, in the face of an angel giving news that on the surface of it could hardly be seen as good to a very young unmarried woman, Mary answers, "Here am I, servant of the Lord."

Remember, we know how the story ends. But at that moment, Mary was just beginning her entry into the expansive stable of Christmas. At that moment, it still had to look small, puzzling, even fearsome. When Mary surrendered, at least a part of her had to think that it meant giving up everything she had hoped for: propriety, a good name, a recognized marriage, fair treatment, a future. At least a part of Mary had to wonder in another way from the way she is normally described to wonder, at least a part of Mary had to wonder if this passive surrender was to give up all that was good and just and hopeful in her life.

But Mary's faith, or maybe something in the face of the angel of the Lord, or maybe the Holy Spirit on the loose even before Jesus was born, but something, something allowed Mary to be drawn in and to surrender to the story: "Here am I, servant of the Lord."

Mary surrendered to the story the angel told her, "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Mary surrendered to the beginning words of the story we surrender to each Christmas.

\*\*\* After this experience, Mary took a trip. Maybe she thought getting away would do her good. Maybe the time slowly negotiating ancient Judean roadways would give her time to think, to grasp what had just happened. Maybe the kind counsel of her older kinswoman Elizabeth would settle her nerves, or maybe, since

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Elizabeth, too, was carrying mystery's child, Mary needed to be with a true kindred spirit, a soul-mate in surrender.

Whatever Mary's intent was, by the time she had arrived at Elizabeth's, the infinity of the stable had unfolded in her perception. Mary understood that her surrender had been anything but a passive collapse. And she knew that her surrender was anything but an indulgence in self-absorption, and sentimentality, either.

Mary had come to understand that in her surrender to God, God had lifted her up. Mary had come to understand, ironically through her surrender, that God does work justice, that God has brought down the mighty and scattered the proud, and that God has lifted up the lowly.

The irony, of course, is that it all hinges on surrender. For the world of our own invention, life and livelihood absent God, is a huge and opulent palace on the outside. But open its doors and enter, and you find its grandeur is but skin deep. Inside it is cramped, finite, dark and musty. But the world of surrender to God looks on the outside to be but a ramshackle stable, at best of no consequence, at worst a nostalgic distraction. But enter here, and what unfolds before your eyes is unimaginably airy and boundless and light and real.

Each year the Christmas story bids us enter this unpretentious gateway. Each year the story reaches out and beckons us in. And each year Mary shows us our part, our line in the story, "Here am I, servant of the Lord." Amen.