

**The Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 21, 2008**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Luke 1:26-38

"Astounding"

**astounding** [*uh-stoun-ding*] – adjective: *capable of overwhelming with amazement; stunningly surprising; as, an astounding force, statement, or fact.*<sup>1</sup>

When was the last time that you were astounded, where something has happened to leave you stunned and amazed? Can you remember back to when an event occurred and all you could say or think was "Wow!" or "Whoa!" or "What?" Groups like Cirque du Soleil, whose acrobats and performers accomplish feats of balance and skill that seem superhuman, build their shows around the astounding: artists twirling through the air like feathers in a breeze; nimble contortionists bending in highly improbably angles; gymnasts controlling every muscle to keep balance high above the ground. But the astounding comes along from time to time in "normal" life, too: an expectant mother and father hear their baby's heartbeat for the first time; a high school senior gets accepted into their college of choice; you drive to work during rush hour without traffic. Astounding things do happen!

But truth be told, aren't we kind of hard to astound? We live, work, and go to school in and around the nation's capital, in one of the most media-connected, information resource-rich, and demographically diverse areas of the entire world. We're familiar with a lot of stuff out here! In less than half an hour, you can head to downtown DC to see landmarks that appear on national newscasts or feature in movies. You can get to shopping malls and stores that folks would be hard-pressed to find in most of the country. Should you be so inclined, you could enjoy dinner at a restaurant that served cuisine from almost every corner of the world. Using our high-speed Internet connections, you could check traffic, get directions to a store, and read a review of a new Peruvian restaurant in mere seconds. But such tasks don't astound us anymore, because they're familiar.

Consider our text from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. Here, we hear again the report of the Annunciation: the angel Gabriel, sent from God, comes to Mary to tell her of the conception of the Son of God in her very womb. Immediately before this part of the text, Luke tells us how Zechariah that he would become father of John – the John we know as the Baptizer. Comparing the two stories, it seems like the earlier one is much more spectacular. Zechariah and Elizabeth were people who were righteous before God, but they had never been able to have a child. In what might have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a priest, Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the temple of the Lord – a big deal, in and of itself. And then an angel appeared to him, standing by the altar and announcing that this man and his barren wife would indeed have a son, a son who would be great before the Lord. What's more, Zechariah was struck dumb, unable to speak until his son was born and named. Astounding news, indeed! Gabriel's visit to Mary in Nazareth, on the other hand, might seem far less likely to astound. There are no crowds, no drama, and no spectacular sign of what's to come. We don't really know anything about Mary's life up to this point, other than that she was a virgin who was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. Given her response to the angel's divine message, it seems that she had a humble heart. Luke doesn't do too much more to set the scene for Gabriel's arrival. And given how many times we're heard this story, especially as we feel we're *really* just waiting for it to be Christmas, this narrative can come off as being pretty far from astounding.

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<sup>1</sup> astounding. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/astounding> (accessed: December, 2008)

Imagine, though, if Michael Bay directed a movie depicting the Annunciation. I know that a couple of Decembers ago, *The Nativity Story* hit theaters and covered the same ground. But that was *not* a Michael Bay movie. Michael Bay makes action-adventure blockbuster movies like *Bad Boys*, *Armageddon*, *The Rock*, and, most recently, *Transformers*. This guy knows astounding! Picture this: we open with a distance shot of a small town in the ancient near east. Letters appear at the bottom of the screen: "NAZARETH IN GALILEE". We move into the town, catching glimpses of daily life: children playing, merchants in the market, men and women going about their chores. The focus moves to Mary, a young woman played by a pretty Hollywood starlet, as she sits quietly, praying on the roof of her home. We cut back outdoors, where we see shepherd boy with his sheep and goats grazing in the foreground. The boy looks to the daytime sky, where something shines in the distance. We then here a sonic boom, as the boy spins to watch the objects overhead, mouthing the word, "Wow!" What could it be? It's the angel Gabriel, accompanied by a squadron of F-22 fighter jets! The jets peel off in formation as Gabriel descends like an arrow from the sky. Mary, bathed in light, turns in wonder (and slow-motion) as the angel alights in front of her and says, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" And then, for no particular reason, big explosions go off in the background like a triumphant chorus. If you saw all that, I don't think you could help but be astounded.

We've already noted that Luke's narrative is devoid of big-budget special effects – or any effects, for that matter – so what about the Annunciation could astound us? It's not that Mary is favored by God. Mary did not do anything to merit God's gift. As we discussed in last week's message, God's favor comes through His grace, *His* doing. If God's favor were based on our merit, it ceases to be grace and becomes law – neither Mary nor you nor I would be worthy, because we sin against God. It's not that Mary is a virgin, either, though that is more astounding than the formerly barren Elizabeth becoming pregnant. God is doing an even greater thing in Mary. What's truly astounding about the Annunciation is what God promises to do, and then does.

God the Son became a real, flesh-and-blood person like you and me, born from Mary. He set aside his glory to be one of us, all out of His astounding love. C.S. Lewis likened Christ's love for us in becoming human to what it might take for us to willingly become a slug or a crab. And not only did God the Son become name for us, He died for us on the cross. But we've heard this Good News so many times, have we stopped letting it astound us?

In the days ahead, we'll welcome in Christmas, the culmination of the Advent season. There's a lot of stuff that goes into a Yuletide routine, especially now. You're probably planning on going to Christmas programs and worship services with friends and family. These events might not possess Hollywood blockbuster production values – for your sake, I hope they don't include explosions! -- but I do hope that they clearly communicate the message the Annunciation. Listen for that message. Listen for the Good News of the loving God who comes to us in the person of the baby whose birth Gabriel foretold. Behind the pageantry and the spectacle, consider that central story of the Christmas narrative, a story that is stunningly surprising: God comes to you.

By God's grace, prepare to be astounded.

Amen.