

**“Angel, Unannounced”**  
**Luke 1:28-36**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Advent**  
**December 11, 2016**

I wish angels gave some warning as to their arrival, especially this one. Gabriel is the slayer angel – God’s warrior. I only know this because a rabbi responded with shock the first time he heard the details of this story from Luke. We were standing outside the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth looking at the artwork on façade of the church. A Christian scholar was explaining to the rabbis the story. You know the one we like to sing placid songs about each year – “The Angel Gabriel to Mary came, his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame.” We remember the snow but not really the flame.

“Why Gabriel?” my rabbi friend asked me? “Because that’s the one we can order from the Christmas catalogs,” I told him. “Gabriel is the warrior angel,” he told me. I had no idea at the time that Gabriel was the angel who interprets some of Daniel’s dreams in the Old Testament. In the Book of Enoch he’s the one who incites sinners to war so they kill each other. That one didn’t make it into the Bible. In the Hebrew Talmud Gabriel is sent to kill the Assyrians. “My sword has been sharpened since six day of Creation,” he says, itching to get into the battle. Gabriel’s name means “God’s might.” Gabriel shows up in Islam, too, where he reveals the Koran to the Prophet Muhammad. Then later he returns to question the prophet on the tenets of Islam which is pretty special since as far as I can tell no one else gets to question the Prophet on the tenets of Islam.

The more I learned about Gabriel the more I wanted my domesticated, tranquil angel back staked to the top of my tree where he belongs. And yet it explains a lot. It explains why it is that Zechariah’s first experience of Gabriel is utter fear. That’s the story just before this one. Zechariah draws lots with the other priests and the lot falls on him to enter the sanctuary of the temple. Legend has it that they used to tie a rope around the waist of the priest who drew the lot to enter the sanctuary in case he dropped dead from being that close to the presence of God. So when Zechariah’s in there all by himself and sees Gabriel – not just any angel but the one slays God’s enemies – of course he’s filled with total fear.

I was temporarily relieved of my fear in Bible study this week when someone suggested correctly that angels don’t really appear that often to people in the Bible or, as far as I can tell, to anyone else. There are a fair number of messengers who show up in the stranger, or speak through other people, she suggested, but very few people ever have to contend with repeat angels with an “M.O.” like Gabriel.

But as the week went on I realized that her insight was really only a statistical observation, not a theological one. The statistical observation is comforting – angels don’t come around that much. But the theological insight was different – God doesn’t give anyone the slightest bit of warning when divine stuff is about to go down. And that put the fear of God back into me. Actually it’s worse than that – the priest – the one who’s supposed to know the ways of God more than

anyone doesn't get the slightest bit of notice, that the boss is going to show up and change everything.

That's whole message of Christmas in a nutshell, which is probably why the church and the culture has worked so hard to domesticate it. I can pretty much tell you how Christmas is going to go – we're going to sing everybody's favorite hymns on Christmas Eve. We'll love the poinsettias, carols, the memories. In fact, if this priest in charge tries to change any of that, we'd have a revolt. We'll practice the same routines at home, rooted in our quaint stories about cute angels and cute babies and father figures with long white beards.

But the notion that God might show up unannounced, and disrupt everything that you are counting on – your present as well as your future – so that God can set something serendipitous in motion – something unexpectedly joyful for the world through your life – well, they don't write too many carols about that. It's unnerving.

I realized writing this sermon how unprepared I am for it even in the church. I spend a lot of Advent thinking how we can prepare each other – nurture expectation and hope. Nurture prayer and action. How we can *prepare* each other when the real truth of the incarnation – of God creeping in alongside us - is that you can't really fully prepare for this God – not the God who shows up in stables to nobodies like Mary and Joseph, to shepherds who are accustomed to nothing but the weekly grind, to powerful people who aren't used to getting off their high camels to come and see kings lying in mangers.

We prefer to negotiate God from our side of things on our terms on our time. Chrissy Ferrara had a similar experience when she starting writing letters daily to Starbucks.<sup>1</sup> She was looking for a performance art project and while getting her cappuccino in Starbucks, she saw a little card that said “we'd love to hear your thoughts.” And so she took them up on their word and she starting writing a letter to Starbucks everyday for one year. “Dear Starbucks,” she began. “I like your coffee. I visit Starbucks almost everyday. I like your dairy selection.” etc.. But soon her letters turned as deep and as serious as a prayer. “Dear Starbucks. Do you think life just happens for a reason? Or is life totally random?” After several months of writing, Starbucks started writing back. “Dear Christine Ferrara, thank you for contacting Starbucks coffee company. It is always a sincere pleasure to hear from valued customers. Providing premium coffee and customer service is Starbucks' goal so it's great to hear that your experiences reflect just that. We have shared your comments with the appropriate partners/employers for their consideration. We hope you enjoy Starbucks Coffee for years to come.” She keeps writing daily and every so often she gets a letter back. After year 1 she writes for another and another and another. For four years she writes to them daily. “I feel like I can confide in them,” she tells her Stoop Storytelling audience, “because they're not a real person.” “Dear Starbucks, today my boyfriend broke up with me.” “Dear Christine Ferrara, your comments are of great concern to us.” “Dear Starbucks, if you are truly in love with someone, but it doesn't work out, how do you ever really get over it?” “Dear Christine Ferrara, we've shared your comments with our management team.” “Dear Starbucks, okay so if you never get over it, doesn't that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wypr.org/post/stories-stoop-chrissy-ferrara>

mean that just about everyone is walking around with a broken heart. How can love ever hope to blossom?" "Dear Christine Ferrara, we hope your future visits to Starbucks bring you nothing but pleasure."

Listening to Chrissy it occurred to me that this is so often how we approach God. As a kind of distant corporate entity where we can send our thoughts without the threat of any kind of personal reply. Someone we feel like we can confide in because there's not a chance of getting anything back other than a standard Sunday liturgy, a sort of stock form letter from the church's customer service department.

Then one day, five years and 2000 letters later, Chrissy gets a different kind of letter. "Hello Chris. I know you have heard from a few of us representatives at Starbucks over the years. I just wanted to say that it truly is a joy to read your notes. Many of us are able to take a mental break from daily work and put ourselves into your world. Sometimes your notes bring a little bit of sunshine into mine and others' days. And sometimes I hear the sadness in your notes and I just want you to know that complete strangers are reading your words and crossing our fingers for you hoping your day gets better. I hope I'm not being too intrusive in personally writing you. Just something I've wanted to do for awhile. Take care. Katie."

Chrissy was freaked out. She realized that she liked writing this "big, faceless, anonymous, distant corporation" but didn't expect them to disrupt her chosen illusion. "I thought we had a kind of agreement" she said. "I'm the human being. I do the babbling. I pour my heart out. They make coffee and tell me to have a nice day."

I wonder if we think we have the same arrangement with God. Come to church on Sunday and get a little God in our lives on our terms. Maybe even pick up an Advent devotional – squeeze in a little God before dinner or breakfast. Even when we work on our spiritual disciplines – how pleased we are to schedule God in on our busy calendars, never thinking that God might just show up unannounced with plans that stoke fear instead of calming it – plans for you! Plans for me! Plans that change everything.

I've seen it happen more often than you might imagine. Someone going along in their 9-5 work and then some messenger comes along and tells them they need to quit their job and become something else. I've seen a person decide she's suddenly called to adopt a child, or a child suddenly tell his churchless parents he wants to go to church – out of nowhere. How did that happen? I know people who have given up their worldly possession – all of them, moved across the world on the basis of a message they say came from God. And every time I think to myself, where did that come from? I wish the angels would give us a little more warning before swooping in a turning lives upside down, before announcing plans that we didn't hatch.

Fortunately, it probably won't happen to you – statistically there's a low probability. But if it does happen to you, this is probably the only warning that you'll get. It won't come from the highest priest – God doesn't share those plans with the clergy. You won't hear about it in most of the carols – it's too unnerving to sing at Christmas time. You won't know until you hear the angel's voice whispering plans God has for you and find yourself awed, or afraid, or shocked to realize this God thing is not some big, faceless, anonymous, distant corporate service

department called “the church.” It’s the God whose joyful intrusions disrupt our habits, our systems, our routines at a time and a place of God’s choosing.