

The Fixer
Luke 1:26-38, Advent 4, Year B
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Oh, you can feel it, can't you? It all starts to seem real when we get to the Gospel lesson on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Young Mary is alone in her room. Gabriel shows up and speaks. There is Mary's moment of perplexity, when she protests her virginity, followed by the angel's explanation of what will happen. The whole thing leaves us giddy, because we know that the Advent time of waiting is almost over. Christmas is almost here.

As many of you know and some of you even witnessed, this Advent season I performed in Mill Mountain Theatre's production of "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." It would be too much to say I starred in the play. Anne Peyton Brothers, Taylor Pillaman, and Eliza Thompson were certainly stars. But I was on stage for only five minutes, and one scene does not a star make. Even so, it was great fun.

"The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" is the hilarious story of a church pageant invaded by the Herdmans, the nastiest, most disruptive kids in town. The best lines in the play are given to Imogene, the eldest sister in the Herdman family.

When Grace, the pageant's director, reads today's portion of the nativity story to the cast, Imogene asks, "Why didn't Mary get to name her own baby? I would have named him 'Bill.' What did the angel do, just walk up to Mary and say, 'Name him Jesus?'"

Grace, who is entirely flustered, responds, "Well, yes!"

And it is a little odd, isn't it? The angel Gabriel does just walk up to Mary and take over. Gabriel arrives like some sort of fixer and begins dictating how things are going to go:

"And now," he says to Mary, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus...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 the Son of God."

Why is this so? Why does the Christmas story necessarily begin this way?

The summer after second grade, my family took our first and only summer vacation to the beach. (My father preferred trips to Civil War battlefields.) We rented a huge, rambling house on the Florida coast outside of Pensacola. My grandparents went with us. In my memory, this vacation has mythic importance rivaling Scripture's nativity story. It was wonderful. Among the memories, I recall waking up early every morning to the sound of the surf and wandering down the boardwalk to the beach. I was up early, but not as early as my grandfather,

Pop. Pop arose with the sun to take his net and bucket and go crabbing at the edge of the water. I would hit the beach just in time to meet him walking back to the house. He'd smile, and I'd look down at a five gallon bucket full of crabs.

Pop never put a lid on that bucket, and I asked him if the crabs could climb out. "Just watch," he said.

Anyone who has ever been crabbing knows what I saw. One crab would extend his body up the side of the bucket. A second crab would climb up the first crab's back and almost make it to the bucket's lip. But just as he reached forward with his pincer, a third crab would latch onto his legs and pull him down. I was mesmerized. Endlessly, the crabs would make the effort to escape their predicament, and each time any hint of cooperation quickly gave way to a primitive panic, with one crab pulling another down in the attempt to leap frog to freedom.

There may be no better image to describe the human condition. We are but crabs in a bucket. We prove incapable again and again of saving ourselves. As individuals, we attempt to reorder our lives so that we are good and pure and fair at least to those we love and cherish, if not to the stranger we meet. We wake up each morning and say with commitment, "*Today* is going to be different. *Today* I will offer the kind word and make the right decisions. *Today* I will..."

And breakfast is barely digested before we feel the worst in us grab hold of an ankle and begin to pull us back down.

Then we turn on the television, open the newspaper, or pull up the internet and realize that, as disordered as our personal lives are, the society in which we live is far worse. With the economic cycle, healthcare delivery, tax policy, foreign relations between our nation and others—take your pick—everything we do seems to cause the crabs to tumble back over one another into the bottom of the bucket. Even our best attempts to make things better create unforeseen consequences, collateral damage that is often worse than the original problem we set out to solve.

And this is not academic. Trust me. Those crabs tumbling to the bottom of the bucket are actual, real people. They line up outside our parish doors each Tuesday morning. They drop their kids off at our Community Youth Program. They lie in hospital beds hooked up to innumerable tubes. They sit in these very pews this very day, anxious about all the ways in which we are flailing around in the bucket and smothering under the mass of other crabs around us.

Sooner or later we find ourselves realizing the futility of trying to save the world. We can't seem to change anything for the better without making other things worse. Heck, we can't even reorient our own hearts with any lasting effect.

Exactly. *That's* why Gabriel shows up that day two thousand years ago. That's why he speaks like a fixer, because we cannot fix ourselves or our world. The time had come for God to take the initiative; the time *has come* for God to take the initiative. We are helpless to help ourselves, but, as Gabriel reminds Mary and reminds us, *nothing is impossible for God*.

As we careen toward the joy of Christmas, we must not forget that. We must not forget the "why" of our joy. It is nothing less than the reality that when we *could not* move to save ourselves, *God moved*. When we like a solitary adolescent child—like Mary—stand paralyzed in the world, knowing that everything we touch seems to fall part, God enters and says, "Do not be afraid. I will overshadow you, and my Son will reign forever and ever."

Our joy is the joy that, in the end, we are *not* crabs trapped in a bucket. We are the beloved of God. Our world is, in fact, *God's* world, and his Son comes to redeem it.

There is, of course, a role we must play. It is the same role Mary plays. Though Mary, a virgin, can take no effective initiative in God's saving action, she must, for it to find purchase, *be willing to receive it*. Gabriel has announced God's plan. Mary has listened. And then there is that moment of pause, that moment when, the Irish tell us, the very stars in the heavens held their breath to see what Mary would say. No doubt in the silence even she can feel the tug at her ankle seeking to pull her down. But Mary says, to the stars' relief, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

All we must do is be receptive. All we must do is loose hold of the one above us and quit trying to save ourselves by pulling the other down. Then God will do the saving work. God will act in us and, finally, when Jesus arrives a second time, in our world.

"Do not be afraid," the angel says, "for you have found favor with God." Get ready! Keep your eyes open! God is coming to save you. Our joy is almost here.

Amen.