

The Visited Planet

Luke 1:26-38

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Sunday, November 30, 2008

First Sunday in Advent - worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The first science fiction movie I saw was the 1951 classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. A remake arrives in less than two weeks. The trailer for the movie shouts, "They came 250 million miles out of space to hold the world spellbound with new and startling powers from another planet." The premise is that the very earth is in danger of annihilation because of an evil humanity, who doesn't know how to care for the earth or the creatures in it. A more advanced civilization sends a messenger to us with the news that if we don't clean up our act, we will be destroyed by the enforcer robots.

There is an entire genre of science fiction films that has to do with planet earth either being abandoned or visited because we've made a mess of things. Even Hollywood knows that things are not as they should be and that something must be done to make it right. They imagine all sorts of plots and saviors, but the real story of how the world will be saved could only come from the mind of God. Let us pray.

Lord God, we pray in this time together that your Holy Spirit would visit us. Give to us understanding minds and willing hearts, so that we may receive you as Mary herself did so long ago. In the name of the One she bore, even Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.

The yearning expressed in those science fiction films is a yearning of the human heart. The Prophet Isaiah tells us the truth behind those yearnings. In chapter 64 of Isaiah we read: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence... (Isaiah 64: 1). As we begin this Advent season, our theme will revolve around God's answer to this deep desire of our hearts that God would come to be with us.

G.K. Chesterton dealt with this issue in his great book, *The Everlasting Man*, published in 1925. The book is basically a response to H. G. Wells' monumental *Outline of History*. Chesterton thinks that Wells has ignored two major issues in human history – the uniqueness of humanity and the uniqueness of Christ. This book was so powerful that the atheist C.S. Lewis became a Christian after reading it. Lewis' comment on the book was that if you are serious about your atheism, you must be careful about what you read.

In his conclusion to the book, Chesterton writes about how most serious thinkers and mythmakers have noticed that the things of creation – trees which bear fruit, beavers who build dams and so forth – all seem to have some purpose to their lives. Such an evident purpose or end in life then leads them to suppose that if there is an end, there must also be a beginning – a first cause.

So, these thinkers (in the most part theists) assume that there is, somewhere in the universe, an Invisible Creator behind all that is. He says: But so long as the race of thinkers was able to think, it was obvious that this admission of a plan brought with it another thought more thrilling and more terrible. There was someone else, some strange and unseen being, who had designed these things, if indeed they were designed. There was a stranger who was also a friend; a mysterious benefactor who had been before them and built up the hills and woods for their coming, and had kindled the sunrise at their rising, as a servant kindles a fire.

But who was this stranger? And so the religions and myths of mankind emerged in an attempt to explain who or what this might be. Mostly the explanations involved not the Stranger himself but those human sages, heroes, prophets and myths that told us about the Stranger. Then Chesterton makes this claim:

Right in the middle of all these things stands up an enormous exception. It is quite unlike anything else...It is nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious maker of the world has visited his world in person...The most that any primitive myth had ever suggested was that the Creator was present

at the Creation. But that the Creator was present at scenes [like] supper parties and that he talked with tax-collector and public officials in the detailed daily life of the Roman Empire –that is something utterly unlike anything else in nature.

That's what Advent is all about. We have this wonderful opportunity to think about the fact that God has come to us. We are a Visited Planet. And the point in time and the place on earth where this visit began was specific and real. It was exactly six months after Zechariah and Elizabeth learned that they would have a child. It was during the reign of Caesar Augustus. It was in a small village in a Galilean province. The visit to this planet began then and there when this Visitor visited Mary.

Mary didn't expect the visit. She was a very young girl who was waiting to be married to her betrothed – Joseph the carpenter of Nazareth. She expected that she would be a mother in the usual way. What was unexpected was that she would be personally chosen by God to be a part of God's work in the world. Mary is so insignificant in the world's eyes that even in this account she does not have a tribe to which she belongs. Joseph does, as do Zechariah and Elizabeth (who appear earlier in this story). She is hidden from the eyes of the world, but not from the eyes of God, who has known her since before the foundation of the world.

So, Gabriel interrupts her life with a couple of messages from the Lord. First, the Lord favors her. Now it's important to remember this and be sobered by it as you think about your life with the Lord. Just exactly what does it mean to be favored by God? (Someone just gave me a sign for my office which says, "God loves you, but I'm his favorite.") The moment Mary says, "Yes," is the moment difficulty and suffering enter her life. Second, Gabriel tells her that she is going to bear a son and that she is to name him Jesus – which basically means "Savior." He goes on to tell her that he will have a kingdom that has no end. If you were at our last Wednesday Night Alive, you heard Earl Palmer give a wonderful, condensed lesson about life and expectations in Palestine at this time. We heard about Greek, Roman and Hasmonean kings, about religious leaders, about lawyers who wanted to renew proper worship and about Zealots who went around stabbing people. It was a time in which everyone was consumed with who would be king.

As Gabriel announces the birth of this son to Mary, he tells her that he will be called the Son of the Most High, that he will receive the throne of King David, that he will reign over the house of Jacob and that his kingdom will have no end. In a world obsessed with kings, Gabriel creates this neon, flashing arrow pointing to Jesus, saying, "Here's the real king!"

Now, don't you know that any mother would be proud to know that her son is going to be great? But Mary, right now, isn't concerned with where her son will end up. Instead, she asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She wants to know how he will get here.

This is part of the scandal that persists to this day – the Virgin Birth. A pastor in Oklahoma City tells this story:

My 5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia was an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel. The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Claire simply said, "I'm Mary." Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, he felt he needed to justify his own role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part. Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin."

Indeed, but I want to suggest something. The disputes about the Virgin Birth are important, for they raise the issue of what God is capable of doing. If God is capable of starting the processes of creation and if he is capable of raising Jesus from the dead, then a virgin birth is no big deal. As important as that discussion is, I think it has been a major distraction, keeping us from an even more scandalous conversation. It is the conversation about the fact that this creator God has come to us in the person of Jesus and that he became one of us and lived among us, lived like us and lived for us – that he visited this planet, that he visited

Mary and that he visits each and every one of us, whether we want him or not. God's messenger made it clear to Mary – the Lord wanted her to receive Jesus and to have Jesus be formed in her. Before she agreed, she asked, "How will he get here?" And that's the question many of us ask. We want the Lord to break open the heavens and come down. We want God's presence in our lives, but we don't think that it's even possible. That's when Gabriel assures us, just like he does Mary, "With God, nothing is impossible." This is not a 'possibility-thinking' verse – this verse has been misused to promise people that God will give you whatever you want – healing, wealth and so forth. That really diminishes God and reduces him to a cosmic vending machine.

You might think that there's something in your life that would keep God from coming close...that because of some aspect of your life, knowing God personally is impossible. But that's not true – nothing can possibly keep God from visiting you. That's what's behind that great passage from St. Paul in his letter to the Roman Christians:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

We read this at just about every funeral because we need comfort at the time of death. But we should read this all the time – especially when we have doubts about the nearness of God. No being in heaven or earth, nothing you have done or are doing, nothing in your future, no matter how great you feel about life or how low you get – none of those things are barriers to an encounter with the Creator of the universe. Not even your doubts or resistance will overcome God's desire to be with you.

Peter Larson, a Presbyterian pastor in Lebanon, Ohio has said: Despite our efforts to keep him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit."

The angel did not rush Mary to give an answer and God will not rush you. Here we are again – that space between the hearing and the doing. Mary is the model of discipleship for everyone – not just women. God interrupted her life when she was thinking about something else. She thought carefully about it and asked a really good question. Then she said "yes" and Jesus came into the world through her.

So, how will Jesus get here for you? Maybe something good will happen and you wonder how such a good thing could come about. You ask, "Who should I thank?" And God visits you. Maybe you're just riding the Metro and a thought of God pops into your head, unbidden. Where did that come from? And God visits you.

There may be an interruption of your life – bad news about your job or health or a relationship that just doesn't work out. We know the list. That may be God getting your attention. And God visits you. It's at those moments that we wonder about God's presence and we cry out: O Lord, that you would break open the heavens and come down! He has already done so – once historically, but as millions will testify, he will come again into any human heart that is ready to receive him. How will he visit you this Advent? Amen.

1. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, Image Books, 1955, page 269 2. *ibid*, 271-272