

I

While we were still students at the University of Missouri, my wife Amy and I once paid a visit to Washington, D.C. One afternoon, we happened to be standing on the top of the steps in front of the U.S. Capitol building, when a man in a suit happened to be passing by. He saw us and stopped, and pointing at our Mizzou sweatshirts, he said, “Are you visiting from Missouri?” As we chatted for a few seconds, I noticed a lapel pin on his suit that looked like a map of the state of Missouri. The encounter only lasted a few seconds, and then he went on his way. I never thought to ask his name, and he didn’t offer it. It was only later that evening when I saw his picture that I realized that we had been standing on the steps of the Capitol having a brief chat with Missouri’s Senior United States Senator.

II

Just about all of us have had encounters like that, a brief brush with someone famous or powerful. And all of us are familiar with and can easily name the centers of power in our world – the capital cities and the centers of trade and commerce, the places where the movers and shakers in the world gather to do their moving and shaking. We live and move and have our being in a culture that is obsessed with celebrity culture, and the latest tweet or post or comment rockets around the world instantaneously.

And that’s part of what makes the story before us all the more intriguing.

Because what is happening in this story is not about someone announcing that they are a running for office. This story is not about someone announcing where they are going to play a sport for some team.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but God is about to do something that will change the way that human beings think about life and death, the way they think about what it means to be human, even the way that human beings tell time. This announcement that God is about to make will shape all of human history and all of human destiny - forever.

And so you’d think that this announcement would be made in the capital city, in the halls of power. You’d think that the first person to receive this news – that the whole world is about to be turned upside down – would be a king or a queen, or at least a prince or princess.

III

But no, that’s not how this story goes. So listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel According to Luke starting in the first chapter at the 26<sup>th</sup> verse.

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed*

*by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” 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.*

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your*

*greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The most important announcement in human history was made in an unimportant, unremarkable town. The recipient of this announcement was not a celebrity, not a politician, not anyone with any real power to speak of, but rather a young girl, probably no more than 14 or 15 years old.

And when the girl received the most important announcement in human history, she ran to tell the news. But she didn’t run to the marketplace or the palace or the capital. No, she ran to another non-descript town, to the home of her older relative Elizabeth.

And it’s quite a picture, isn’t it – these two pregnant women – far from the halls of power. Way out on the margins. One barely a teenager. One who is stretching the definition of “advanced maternal age.” Both marveling at the new life growing inside them and wondering together about just what exactly God is up to in the world.

For the next several months, we’re going to be reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Luke. A gospel is a unique type of literature. It’s not a biography, although Luke’s gospel has more biographical details than any of the other three. But simply put, the

word gospel means “good news.” For the next several months, we’re going to be listening to the good news about Jesus Christ as told through the voice of Luke.

And right off the bat, right here in the first chapter, Luke introduces to some of this good news. It’s good news that when God begins to move in the world, God begins at the margins, on the edges, rather than at the center. Here’s just a teaser – on Thursday evening, we’ll read the story of the birth of Mary’s baby, and when the angels go to announce the birth of the king of kings and the lord of lords, that announcement isn’t made to the courtiers in the palace, but rather to the shepherds in the fields.

#### IV

You and I live and move and have our being in a culture that is laser focused on what is happening at the center of things. Our culture draws us like moths to the flame to the latest Tweet, or the latest post, or the latest story about what some important person said or did in some important place. The airwaves and our mailboxes and our social media feeds are full of announcements demanding our thoughts and attention. And all of that is fine and good to a point. We need to be educated and informed voters. The latest acts and fashions of athletes and celebrities can be a fun and much-needed distraction.

But here’s the good news for you, my friend. When God chose to become

incarnate in the world, God could have just dropped down from heaven in bodily form. When God chose to become incarnate in the world, God could have plopped right down in the seat of power.

But the good news is that God upends our expectations and turns upside down our understandings of power and influence. The good news is that you need not be powerful or famous or rich to gain access to God. You can’t be too young or too old to play a key role in the new thing that God is doing in the world. The good news is that God chooses to enter the world in and through Mary and Elizabeth, and in and through you and me.

My friend, God is not interested in you because of the size of your power or your pocketbook. God is not interested in you because of where you come from or who your people are. God is interested in you because God is up to something in this world, and you belong to and have found favor with God. God is bringing justice and righteousness and light into this broken and hurting world, and God has a key role for you to play in that mission.

But God won’t force you to accept the role. You still get a say in the matter. I think Mary could have said, “I’m too frightened,” or, “I’m too young,” or, “I’m afraid of what this news will mean to Joseph and his family and my family.” And Jesus still would have been born. God still would have become incarnate. I’m convinced that God is going to get done

what God wants to get done in the world, either because of us, or in spite of us. So you have a choice, my friend. You can say no to God's invitation to be part of the new thing that God is doing in the world.

But Mary said yes. Even though she was frightened, even though she was perplexed, she still said, "Let it be with me according to your word." She believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. And 2,000 years later, we're still talking about her faith and courage.

And you, too, have found favor with God, my friend. You, too, have been invited to have a front row seat for the inbreaking of the kingdom of God that is happening not in the halls of power, but out there with the people on the margins, right out there with the people on the edges, right out there with the people who are far removed from the center of things, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. So what part will you play?

## V

And what part will we play together as a community of faith? This Friday will mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the chartering of the First Presbyterian Church of Athens. On December 25, 1820, 21 women and men formed the membership roll of the Presbyterian Church of Athens under the pastorate of Dr. Moses Waddel. The pandemic has caused us to rework and rethink many of the ways in which we planned to commemorate this

milestone, but not many congregations can boast two centuries of witness and service in Christ's name, and so we rightly pause and give thanks and celebrate together.

But soon we will be embarking on our third century of mission and ministry. And in this new century, there be new challenges to be faced. There will be new changes to which we must adapt. There will be seasons of joys to be celebrated and seasons of sorrows to be mourned and seasons of strife and tedium to be endured.

But as we stand on the edge of this third century of mission and ministry in Christ's name, God is up to something in our world. The kingdom of God is close at hand. We are closer to it today than we were yesterday.

And in this new century, God has a vital part for the First Presbyterian Church of Athens to play in God's mission of delivering justice and peace and righteousness and mercy in our community, in our state, and in our nation. This congregation has found favor with God, not because of what we've done or not done, but because of who God is, and not because of who we are, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. What will we say? Will we let it pass us by? Or will we say, "Here we are, the servants of the Lord. Let it be with us according to your Word."

Thanks be to God. Amen.