

The End of the World as We Know It, Part 4 (The First Fool for Christ)

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 and Luke 1:26-38

© Stacey Steck

Preached December 18, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

Some of you who were English majors may remember reading Alexander Pope's famous essay from 1711 called "An Essay on Criticism." In that essay, Pope coined the now-famous phrase, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" as part of his own criticism of careless critics of the days' literary works, whom, he believed, were poisoning an otherwise delightful new literary era with untimely, uneducated, unkind, and most importantly, unnecessary words. Pope believed that the critics of his day had just a little bit too great an opinion of themselves which they expressed in tearing others down, rather than building them up. Perhaps invoking God to save himself from being a victim of his own criticism, Pope also included another famous line which many people now attribute to the Bible, "To err is human; to forgive divine." There is some debate as to how Christian was this Pope, but he seems to have been on to something when he wrote these lines which have persisted in our consciousness for these past three hundred years.

When he commented on fools and angels, Alexander Pope most certainly wasn't thinking about Mary, the mother of Jesus, but perhaps he should have. No, when Pope was condemning his critics, he was using the word "fool" in its more traditional sense, as an insult. But Mary, as we read, was a fool of another kind, the kind we celebrate, the kind the apostle Paul holds up as examples of those who

really get it about God, who see through the shallowness of everyday concerns to the depths of the divine, a fool for Christ. In fact, she was the very first “fool for Christ,” because she trod that road even angels were afraid to travel. Remember, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Mary is the first fool for Christ, stepping in for inadequate angels. OK, so it is true that Mary didn’t exactly rush in to say yes to the angel Gabriel’s annunciation, nor did God really assign the task of bearing the son of God to an angel who declined with trembling wings, but isn’t it interesting that despite possessing all kinds of power, Gabriel did not have the power to bring life or light into the world? That was left to Mary, and her probably 12 year old womb.

In the Bible, angels are clearly an important part of the story, but they have their limitations. Overall, the role of angels is simply as their names in the original Hebrew and Greek languages suggest: they are malach, angelos, messengers for God. They are sent by God to bring both warning and good news, the kind we heard today. Contrary to popular images that may be on the tops of your Christmas trees, the Bible depicts them as pretty fearsome beings, so fearsome that their first words usually needed to be, “Do not fear!” There is some debate as to their true nature, whether they are created beings, or purely spiritual beings, members of some kind of heavenly council. But in any case, as we learn in Psalm 8, they were, in the overall cosmological scheme of things, somewhere between God and human beings. What is it the psalmist says? “What are human beings that you are mindful

of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than angels, and crowned them with glory and honor.” Some angels have names; we heard about Gabriel tonight, and Michael can be found in Daniel and Jude and Revelation, and Raphael and all the rest can be found in other Christian writings. Angels have fascinated human beings since God only knows when, and probably will forever. Witness the popularity of that television show “Touched By An Angel,” which ran for nine years and in its time was the sixth highest rated US TV show. How many classic works of art feature angels? How many times have we heard stories of “guardian angels” whom people believe have saved them from danger or death? How many Cupids have we seen shooting arrows into lovebirds on Valentine’s Day. Angels have almost replaced the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, although they are in close fight with our obsession with the so-called “fallen angel,” Satan, for that honor.

Perhaps our fascination stems from a kind of jealousy that they are higher than we are. We never want to be in second place to anyone. But if that is true, we have no reason to be jealous or yearning for a higher place, for truly, we are at least as important as they are, but in a different way. You see, the Bible makes clear that angels can’t do everything that needs to be done, or at least there is no evidence that they have been sent to do it. From the same Psalm 8 we learn that it was not to angels, but to us, that God gave dominion to care for the earth. It was not to angels, but to us, that God gave the tasks of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty,

visiting the sick and the prisoner, and all the rest. If there is something that God gives angels to do that we should best leave to them, it seems to be executing God's justice, as the angel of death did over the firstborn of all Egypt, or when various armies were routed ahead of the Israelite lines, or as we read in Revelation of the cosmic battles to come. God has the right team for justice and vengeance, and thank God it need not be us. But all in all, the evidence about angels suggests that there are areas in which angels fear to tread. And that means God needs fools to rush on in.

You see, the angels aren't going to do very much for us. If they could, they already would have and there would be no need for us. We are needed for even so glorious a thing as sex, something the angels might want to reserve for themselves if they could. Mary is, of course, the exception in terms of divine pregnancies, but in all the other Biblical stories of barren women becoming miraculously pregnant, there is always a very clear indication that so and so "knew her husband" or so and so "went in to his wife," those wonderful Biblical euphemisms for sex. But remember too that it was not the angel Gabriel who "went in to Mary," but that she was "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High. We do not hear stories of angel excursions to the homes of those who pray to God for children. Yes, human beings are still very necessary in God's scheme of things, but even more than that, it is fools who are necessary, if the world is to be a more humane place to live.

In the Old Testament, there is not much nice said about fools; you wouldn't want to be one. But in First Corinthians, chapters three and four, the Apostle Paul has something different to say about wisdom and foolishness: "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." Later, he goes on to say rather ironically, "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ" when he implicates some in the Corinthian church for thinking a little too highly of themselves. He is poking those who we might say have an angel complex, who think that through their piety, or their divine election, they have ascended in that divine hierarchy, that they are now a little higher than those who are a little lower than the angels. These are those who think they are angels; who do just enough good deeds to make themselves appear to have bright and shiny wings, at least in front of their own mirrors, and occasionally to other people. Maybe you have met some of these people. But when the moment comes to prove it, the truth that lies deeper within is revealed, that they really are afraid to get in and get dirty, to help when it is really needed. They fear becoming fools for Christ, taking that risk, that plunge. They hide behind issues of security, and family, and health, but in the end, appearing angelic is as far as they get.

In Tim Russert's book, "Wisdom of Our Fathers," a collection of stories he pulled together about people's remembrances of their fathers, he records the story of Mr. Strawberry, as told by Joseph Kelly. My Kelly writes, "When I was ten and

helping out at my dad's liquor store, a man walked in looking disheveled and confused. He told Dad that he had no money, his car had broken down, and he was trying to get home. Without hesitation, my father gave the man twenty dollars and called him a cab. "Dad," I said, "that guy was a bum. Why did you do that?" He said he could see from the man's eyes that he was telling the truth and was in trouble. The following Christmas Eve, flowers were delivered to our business, addressed to Joseph Kelly and his son, wishing us a merry Christmas and signed Mr. Strawberry. For the next forty years, the flowers came without fail. I finally asked Mr. Strawberry, who had become a regular customer, why he sent us flowers every year. He told me that on one of the worst days of his life, on one of the hottest days of the year, his car broke down and he, a black man, was then mugged by three white teenagers while he was trying to get help. His insulin was low, he was dazed and confused, nobody except Dad was willing to help him, and he would remember that as long as he lived."

It would be nice to think that angels would have attended Mr. Strawberry, but apparently, they were otherwise occupied, or on strict orders not to help, or perhaps even too afraid to step into a situation like that. We'll never know. But we do know that Joseph Kelly was a fool, a fool who rushed in where those angels feared to tread. And we know too that Joseph Kelly was no angel, for if he had been of that class that thought of themselves as angels, Mr. Strawberry might not have survived to send flowers each Christmas Eve for the next forty years.

And this is where we must come back to Mary, and her visit from Gabriel, and her words that show us she was the world's first fool for Christ. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." You see, the world doesn't need more angels. It needs more fools, more people like Mary who say "Yes" to God, despite the consequences. We are well aware of what was at stake for Mary to become pregnant when, and how, she did: social and religious ostracism if not violence, the very real possibility that no one would marry her, and thus that she would have to fend for herself in a far more hostile economic environment than single mothers face today. One would have to be a fool to risk all of that by saying, "Yes!" to an angel, and we must be grateful she did. It was not the eighteenth century author Alexander Pope, but rather the twentieth century Pope Paul VI, who wrote: "The Virgin Mary has always been proposed to the faithful by the church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which scarcely today exists anywhere. Rather she is held up as an example to the faithful for the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples." The church has long acknowledged that Mary was the first fool, but she cannot be the last.

You see, angels, whether heavenly or earthly, aren't going to do what needs to be done. They are not going to appear like human beings like they were portrayed on "Touched by an Angel."

And they are not going to...tend to a sick child all night long.

They are not going to...stand for years behind a death-row inmate wrongly convicted.

They are not going to...sit down in the cafeteria beside the new kid sitting alone whose clothes mark him as being from the wrong side of the tracks.

They are not going to...set themselves on fire in Tunisia to call attention to the injustice their government is perpetrating.

They are not going to...pay out of their own pockets for teaching materials because their schools cannot afford them

They are not going to...you name it. And if angels won't do all these things, who will? It will be the fools of the world, those who rush in where those angels fear to tread, who accept that the coming of Christ means the end of the world as they knew it. May we all be such fools this Christmas, and say with Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I want to close with a lovely blessing written for those of us who would be those fools for Christ. Let us make it our prayer:

A Blessing for After

This blessing
is for the moment
after clarity has come,
after inspiration,
after you have agreed
to what seemed
impossible.

This blessing
is what follows
after illumination departs
and you realize
there is no map
for the path
you have chosen,
no one to serve
as guide,
nothing to do
but gather up

your gumption
and set out.

This blessing
will go with you.
It carries no answers,
no charts,
no plans.
It carries no source
of light
within itself.
But in its pocket
is tucked a mirror
that from time to time
it will hold up to you
to remind you
of the radiance
that came
when you gave
your awful and wondrous
yes.

In the name of the Christ who helps us to say, “Yes,” we pray. Amen.