

**“The Nature of Faith”**  
**Luke 1:39-45**  
**December 6, 2020**

*God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to a young maiden, Mary, who was engaged to a man descended from David. Gabriel informed her that she would become pregnant, give birth to a son, and that she was to name him Jesus. Gabriel told her also that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant and she would also bear a son blessed by God. The angel assured Mary, “Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy will.” The story continues in Luke 1, beginning with the 29<sup>th</sup> verse:*

Mary didn’t waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You’re so blessed among women,  
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!  
And why am I so blessed that  
the mother of my Lord visits me?  
The moment the sound of your  
greeting entered my ears,  
The babe in my womb  
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.  
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,  
believed every word would come true!

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

What Mary replied to the angel Gabriel is one of my favorite mantras. I use it to calm myself down when anxiety creeps in. Sometimes I use it when I feel my will clashing with what Spirit is telling me is right. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy will.” I say it over and over until I believe it. Sometimes it takes just a few repetitions; sometimes it takes a couple of days, and sometimes a lifetime. That’s how faith works.

The question is: is faith inside us all along, or do we have to go out and find it somewhere?

Mary seems to access her faith quite readily, despite her shocking news. Without pause or question, she commits herself wholly and immediately to the will of God. This has not been my life's experience, and I doubt yours is much different.

So how does faith take hold of a person such that one's ego gives way to divine will?

Sixteen-year old Jamal Wallace in this week's film, *Finding Forrester*, has never found much of anything to have faith in. He lives in a modest apartment in the Bronx with his mother and older brother. His father left the family and his brother ruined his life with drugs. Jamal is gifted in two extraordinary art forms: basketball and writing, but he is undiscovered for each and has little hope of making either into a career. As his brother reminds him, "They only let you get so far before they take *everything* away from you."

That is, until the angels bring him a blessing in the form of William Forrester, a nasty old recluse and Pulitzer Prize winning writer. Forrester is played in the movie by Sean Connery, so you get a sense of his crisp, no nonsense personality.

The kids playing basketball below his apartment call Forrester, "The Window." Though he never leaves his apartment, he watches them through binoculars as they play basketball below. One day on a dare, Jamal sneaks into Forrester's apartment through an open window, but when startled, he drops his backpack and skedaddles out of there. In his backpack are all his journals, full of original writing. Forrester returns the backpack a few days later by throwing it out of the window. When Jamal runs to check it to see if his journals are still there, he sees that all of his writings have been critiqued across the pages in red felt pen.

So begins an uneasy relationship between Jamal and William that grows into a mentoring relationship and finally into friendship, a deep connection they both need forged in a mutual love of writing and sports.

Faith. It takes faith to put yourself out there for another person. It takes faith to enter a writing competition as the only black student in an all-white Manhattan private shi-shi school. It takes faith to give up a promising career in basketball as a statement against the implicit racism that allows powerful elites to define Jamal solely as a sports star rather than as a talented student *and* a gifted athlete.

It takes faith for a recluse writer to open his life to a youngster from another generation, another race and another class and not take pity on him, but rather challenge him to be the best he can be. Faith is what it takes, whether spoken or unspoken, and salvation is what it brings to both a young man and an old man who help each other see a way ahead in abundant life.

The Gospel story provides us the same parallelism. When Gabriel gives Mary her news, she doesn't go to her betrothed, Joseph. Instead, she goes to her cousin, Elizabeth, who has been blessed with her own pregnancy long after she thought she could ever conceive.

It is no accident that Luke identifies Gabriel as the bearer of this Good News: this is the only place in the four gospels where an angel is identified by name. Gabriel means in Hebrew, "God is my strength" and derives from Jewish lore that there are four central angels who serve God and always surround us: Raphael stands behind and represents healing; Oriel stands in front and represents illumination or knowledge; Michael is at our right and stands for mercy; and Gabriel-power and judgment-is at our left.

Therefore, when Luke invokes the name Gabriel in these deeply cautionary accounts, he emphasizes to the Christus community that the *power* of the Jewish community has not abandoned them even the Jewish *community* seemingly has. They can rest assured that they carry God’s strength with them into their new lives, and thus they will be protected. (Alexander John Shaia, *Heart and Mind: The four Gospel Journey for Radical Transformation*, 2019, p. 306)

I very much like the image of angels surrounding us. It makes me feel less anxious about the pandemic and all the other issues that keep us awake at night. Even when we receive the most shocking, groundbreaking news that upends our lives, we have the protection of the angels, though we may be wholly unaware of their presence. Angels figure so prominently in Advent for this reason; they make appearances to Joseph, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary, the shepherds and the Wise men, signaling to us that God is intimately involved in the story of the Christ child. Jesus has been specially blessed even before his birth.

The two expectant mothers—Elizabeth and Mary-- explore their faith together, “singing exuberantly” of their news and pledging to help each other in the coming months, but Mary does not go to Joseph until her pregnancy is viable and she has faith that *he*, in faith, will accept her news. Luke’s message is to let blessing and faith mature together before announcing either one.

They wonder what God has in store for their sons. Little do they know that both will make headlines, both will bring the most vulnerable people to know- in faith- that God loves them just as they are. John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus will change the world—their *faith and their unique gifts* will change the world and will forever change the way that common people are in personal relationship with their God.

Where do you find angels in your life story? In Protestantism, we are not very practiced in naming and claiming our angels, but ancient wisdom and faith tells us they are there for us, whether or not we are aware. The angels stand behind us...in front of us...to our right...and to our left. I bet if you close your eyes and calm your monkey mind, you can sense their presence and influence in your life. You have to take it on faith that they are there. Call on them; they will attend to you.

We do not stand alone. We have angels. We have Elizabeths to journey with us; we have Josephs to accept on faith what we proclaim; and we have God's heart—yes, most of all we have God's Spirit Alive working in and through us as we birth our unique blessings and talents into the world.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to thy will.”

*May Faith Make It So.*

Donations to our church gratefully accepted:

<https://www.uccparkerhilltop.org/giving/>

or text your donation to

844-901-3051

UCC Parker Hilltop

10926 E. Democrat Rd.

Parker, CO 80134