

# Mothers, Angels and Little Boys

Preached by the Right Reverend Grant Lynn Ford at the Sunshine Cathedral on Sunday, December 9, 2007.

## THE WRITTEN WORD

### The Light of the Ages

Isaiah 11:1-3

<sup>1</sup>The royal line of David will be chopped down like a tree; but from the stump will grow a shoot, a new branch. <sup>2</sup>The Spirit of THE ETERNAL will dwell in him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of purpose and strength, of knowledge and reverence for THE ETERNAL—<sup>3</sup>much to his great delight!

### The Light from a Teacher of Truth

*High Mysticism* – Emma Curtis Hopkins

No person has ever stood so boldly forth for the Redemption of the ‘God Self’ of humanity from the clutches of the ‘mortality self’ as that young man of Nazareth two thousand years ago! No lover of his brother and sister so willing to die that he might show humanity its own ‘God transcendence’ has ever appeared on this earth! *Inclusified, updated and repunctuated for public reading*

### The Light of the Master Teacher

Luke 1:26-38

<sup>26</sup>The following month God sent Gabriel the archangel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>Mary, a virgin pledged to be married to Joseph, a descendant of David. <sup>28</sup>The heavenly messenger said to her, “Greetings, blessed lady! The HOLY ONE is with you!” <sup>29</sup>Mary was startled, wondering what in the world this was all about!

<sup>30</sup>“Don’t be frightened, Mary,” the angel told her. “God is delighted with you! <sup>31</sup>You’re going to have a child; you’ll name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be famous, known as the Son of the Most High. The ALMIGHTY will give him a dominion like his ancestor David, <sup>33</sup>with full authority over his people. His reign will never end!”

<sup>34</sup>“How is that possible?” Mary asked the angel. “I’m still a virgin!”

<sup>35</sup>“It’s like this,” replied Gabriel. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you—the power of God will envelope you—so this holy child will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Your cousin Elizabeth is also going to have a child. They said she was unable to conceive, yet she’s already six months pregnant! <sup>38</sup>Nothing is impossible with God.”

<sup>38</sup>“I’m the servant of the Almighty,” said Mary. “Let it happen just as you’ve told me.” And the angel left her.

## THE PROCLAIMED WORD

Today’s Gospel lesson is all about children and mothers and angels to boot. Rich reminds me of Billy, Faye’s son; you know, the kid with so much energy he drives you crazy.

Well, Faye is finally at her wit’s end, so she asks the little mischievous lad: “Billy, how do you expect to get into heaven when you’re always so naughty?”

Billy thinks about this question for a little while, then replies, “Well, mom, I’ll run in and out and in and out and I’ll keep on slamming the gates of heaven until the angel at the gates says, ‘For heaven’s sake, Billy, come in or stay out.’”

Today’s Gospel story is quite a story indeed. But did you know that this same story appears in the Qur’an? In fact, that account has much more detail than Luke’s version.

This background gives the story of the annunciation more depth. The Qur’an identifies Elizabeth as Mary’s aunt and, more importantly, married to Zechariah. Mary had been raised by them when her own father died. Her mother pledged Mary to the temple, and Zechariah became a surrogate father as well as her religious teacher, even though she was a girl.

This elderly couple is now to have a child, who will come to be named John. The unborn John recognizes Jesus—also in the womb—as his superior. The meeting is full of joy. The stories here don’t necessarily form parallels, but rather complement each other.

When it comes to the annunciation, in the Qur’an Mary modestly shields herself behind a screen so the angel doesn’t have to gaze at her directly. Such modesty would never have entered the mind of a Jewish storyteller, or of Luke, who is a Greek physician.

In the Qur’an the message of the angel goes like this: “Behold, Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings, a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the hereafter...” Mary asks, “O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?” The angel answers, “Even so: Allah creates what He wills: When He has decreed a plan, He but says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is!”  
*Surah 3:45-47*

In Luke’s version of the story Mary hears the words of the angel and then asks: “How is that possible? I’m still a virgin!” Gabriel replies, “It’s like this; the Holy Spirit will come upon you—the power of God will envelope you—so this holy child will be called the Son of God.”

Then Gabriel tells her, “Your cousin Elizabeth is also going to have a child. They said she was unable to conceive, yet she’s already six months pregnant! Nothing is impossible with God.”

In one version ‘aunt’ and in another ‘cousin’? How can this be? In those days the word cousin really included all close relatives, so the two versions are not really that far apart.

But here’s a more important note: in both the Qur’an and the Bible the angel is speaking on God’s behalf *to a woman*. In fact, the angel has been busy talking all over the place, to Zechariah and later to Joseph. But *women* are equally as important in the plan of God, even though prejudice will be against them. Elizabeth will be embarrassed to be with child at her age, and the neighbors will talk! And what will the neighbors say about Mary, an unwed girl who was supposedly a virgin, but now with a big belly full of an unborn child.

Being an expression of God’s Plan is not always easy. Finding the will of God for your life is not always a picnic. Ask Elizabeth. Ask Mary.

But isn’t that why we’re here on this planet in the first place? Are we not here to experience life itself, and thus to discover where we fit into the Divine Pattern of the Universe?

Let’s look at some other stories that might throw light on all this. The citizens of Jerusalem were being carried off by Nebuchadnezzar into exile in Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the remnant who had not yet been exiled. The biblical record even tells us the names of the bearers of the message: Elasah, son of Shaphan, and Gemariah, son of Hilkiah. They themselves were carried into exile, and took the message with them.

Of course, they were all lamenting their plight, and Jeremiah wanted to send them a word of comfort. Here’s what he imparted to them, speaking on God’s behalf: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Eternal, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” *Jeremiah 29:11*

Well, that wasn’t a whole lot of comfort! Jeremiah even went on to tell them to pray for Babylon and for its leadership, and to settle down, build houses, raise families, fulfill God’s plan for their lives right where they were.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says God. And so we are reminded that God’s plan is always working out, in each of our lives, right on schedule, even when it doesn’t look the greatest.

By the way, the people of God waited those seventy years that they were told to wait by the prophet. And indeed the people of God *did* return to Israel, not while Nebuchadnezzar was king, but by order of Cyrus, who made Babylon a part of his larger kingdom of Persia.

The plan of God always works out for the best. Look at Elizabeth and Zechariah. They had a boy who became a great prophet. His name was John, as reported again by both the Bible and the Qur’an. He made a great impact on his world, and next week we will celebrate his birth.

And look at Mary. She and Joseph had a wonderful son, whose birth we will celebrate in a few weeks. The angel was right. Listen to Gabriel’s words: “God is delighted with you! You’re going to have a child; you’ll name him Jesus. He will be famous, known as the Son of the Most High... His reign will never end!”

Do you ever question whether you are in God’s will or not? Do you ever wonder if there’s a purpose for your life? Perhaps this word from Rainer Maria Rilke is what you need to hear:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions”

He knew that even when we feel we are defeated, we are learning and thus winning. He wrote: “The purpose of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things.” Only by experiencing what life offers can we appreciate our reason for being on this planet!

It might take an angel or two—or perhaps the words of the Psalmist (37:23-26)—to convince us that “...the steps of a good person are ordered by the Eternal, who delights in the path taken. Even when tripped up or stumbling about, the hand of the Almighty is there to hold on.”

God is leading each one of us into the path of our own blessing, as we learn our purpose and express God’s good in all we do or say. Elizabeth can witness to that. Mary can witness to that. Even Billy, Faye’s son, can witness to that. And that’s the truth!

## THE FINAL WORD

The Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila says: “We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can, namely, surrender our will and fulfill God’s will in us.” Or as author and shaman Doug Boyd puts it: “If I have learned one thing in this life, it is that God will not tie my shoes without me.”