Sermon for The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, December 23, 2018


Title: Course corrections

A few days ago, while listening to a couple I’m going to marry in a few months share about how they’d met, it suddenly dawned on me that it was the ten-year anniversary of the fateful day when I sat next to my future husband on a flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco. A day that marks the beginning of our life together. I rushed home to remind Haamid of this, and we laughed and hugged and reminisced, telling each other how grateful we feel, ever and always, for that chance encounter. And I found myself thinking in the days that followed about the difference between how we remember important events and how we experience them.

The truth is, we are not, as a rule, very good at noticing when the course of our lives begins to shift. With the benefit of ten years in the rearview mirror - five years of marriage, two children, all the moves and ordinations and other transitions – I can point to December 18th, 2008 and say, “yep - that was a big one. That was the beginning of this whole new chapter in my life.” But if you’d asked me in the days and weeks that immediately followed December 18th, 2008 if anything important had happened to me lately, I would probably have scrunched up my nose and scratched my head. I might have mentioned a good book I’d read. Or an exciting interview we’d secured for the documentary film I was working on. But it’s unlikely I’d have said much about the commuter flight I took last Thursday. It had been a pretty crummy day, actually. Nothing had gone as planned. I was still dealing with the aftermath of all the things I hadn’t managed to get done before leaving L.A. and was trying to wrap up before Christmas. And I’d sat next to a nice guy on the way home – nice enough to share my phone number, which was unusual – but, you know, we’d probably never see each other again.

It wasn’t until Haamid and I met for our first not-date, and coffee turned into a hike that turned into dinner which led to a movie, and that not-date unfolded into a twelve-hour date, swiftly followed by many others, and butterflies took up residence in my belly, and the daydreaming set in, that I started thinking about December 18th, 2008 differently. Until, eventually, Haamid and I looked back on that date in awe, telling and re-telling each other the unlikely story of the crossing of our paths, when 30,000 feet above the earth we began a journey
neither of us had ever intended to take. But all that took time. At first, it didn’t really register. At first, it was barely a blip on the radar.

I wonder if this is a little like how Mary adjusted to her new reality, to the beginning of her new life.

There she was, minding her business, betrothed to a good enough guy, when Gabriel shows up - unannounced, unexpected, uninvited – and says, of all things, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.” Right off the bat Mary is unsettled, not sure what to make of this mysterious messenger and his even more mysterious message: that she will conceive in her womb and bear a son, the holy child of God. It is a strange conversation. Intense. Overwhelming. But brief. Ephemeral. With all the qualities of a vision, or a dream. And perhaps by the time she woke up the next morning she’d convinced herself that’s precisely what it was – a dream, even a good dream, if a strange one. She had meant it, though, hadn’t she? When she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” But it was all so unlikely. And when she stumbled up from the spring and tumbled back into her ordinary life, everything else looked so, well, ordinary. Nothing else had changed. No one else had seen him – those eyes, that glow. No one else noticed anything different, anything unusual.

We might be tempted to think that this particular course correction was so memorable – an Angel came to speak to her, for goodness sake! – that Mary couldn’t possibly have missed its importance, but sometimes the most exceptional, unusual moments are also the easiest to shrug off. Outliers, you know. And so she was lulled her back into the familiar landscape of daily life, and maybe when she ran into someone she hadn’t seen in a while and they asked her what was new, she scrunched up her nose and said, “Not much. We got a new lamb. And I’ve been busy planning the engagement party.” But of the mysterious messenger and his mysterious message, well, she said nothing.

Except, well, maybe the dream just wouldn’t stop. Maybe she couldn’t get rid of that nagging sense that something had changed, even if no one else had noticed. Maybe butterflies took up residence in her tummy, alongside something else entirely, and she remembered the angel – or the voice, the vision, the fantasy – had something about Elizabeth being pregnant. And, oh, Elizabeth! How had she not thought of it before? Her older, wiser, wonderful cousin. If she could tell anyone about this strange happening surely it would be her. So she set off, expecting only to unburden herself, except the moment she arrives something shifts. The whole
radical reality comes into focus. No one else had noticed … but Elizabeth and her unborn child
sure did. They see what no one else sees. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they recognize the miracle
that has taken place. And finally, with enough time in her rearview mirror, Mary does, too.

Mary’s response to Gabriel had been measured. Thoughtful. “Let it be with me according
to your word.” But now her tongue is loosed, and filled with – what? awe? fear? wonder? joy? –
she sings. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for God has
looked with favour on the lowliness of God’s servant.” And Mary’s song tells us something
important about her, something essential. It tells us that though God, it seems, only recently
turned God’s attention to Mary, Mary has been paying attention to God for a long time. The song
she sings rings with the bold hope of the prophets, echoes the song of Hannah sung ages before;
resounds with the traditions of her people. Mary had been waiting for God to do a New Thing,
and even if it took her a while to fully appreciate it when it arrived, she was prepared to risk
trusting God when God finally came a knocking.

We are not always good at noticing when the course of our lives begins to shift, but if we
are in the habit of trusting God, welcoming God, saying yes to God, we just might find ourselves
in the middle of an unimaginable adventure.

In 1948, Ernest Wynder, then a young medical student doing a surgical rotation in New
York, encountered a patient with advanced lung cancer. There being virtually no treatment
available at the time, the man, who had been a life-long smoker, quickly succumbed to his
disease. Wynder sat in on the autopsy, which revealed tar-stained, soot-blackened, terribly
scarred lungs. The surgeon performing the autopsy barely seemed to notice, so inured was he to
such things. Smoking had exploded in America in the first half of the 20th century. In 1870, the
per capital consumption of cigarettes was less than one per year, but by 1953, the average
American adult consumed ten cigarettes a day.¹

Incredibly, at the moment when Wynder observed that grotesque autopsy, the medical
establishment recognized no link – no link at all – between smoking and lung cancer. There had
never been a formal research study to even examine such a relationship, so far from everyone’s
mind was this possibility. But Wynder was sufficiently alarmed by what he was seeing in his
patients that he applied to his medical school for funding to run just such a study. His application
was denied, and he was told the effort would be futile. He then wrote to the US Surgeon General,

¹ Mukherjee, Siddhartha. The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer, 240.
who responded, “there exists no reason why experimental work should be conducted along this line.” Finally, he convinced a respected and more established, though still skeptical, colleague doctor to help get the study off the ground. When Wynder presented his ideas at a conference on lung biology in Memphis later that same year, most of his audience fell asleep during his talk, and not a single question or comment came at the end. Incredibly, the following presentation on an obscure lung disease in sheep stirred a lively thirty-minute debate amongst the very same participants.

In the years that followed, partially thanks to the pioneering work of Wynder and his partner Graham, a flood of research would quickly come to light unequivocally showing the link between smoking and lung cancer, and people would start to wonder, as we do today, how anyone could ever have failed to notice it. How it could possibly have taken so long to connect the dots. How well-trained and well-intentioned experts, like those attending that conference in Memphis, could have missed such an obvious link.

Reflecting on this in his impressive book The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer, Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee notes that it was probably not for a lack of evidence that it took people so long to realize what was happening, but because of a surplus of evidence. When two unlikely things overlap – say, a rare form of cancer in a very particular population - it is easy to notice a correlation. But when almost 50% of everyone around you is doing something - maybe smoking, or using a smart phone, taking Fish Oil, eating foods made with GMOs, drinking Macha, using WiFi – the reality of that thing fades into the background like white noise. It is harder and harder to notice it at all, let alone connect it with a broader story.

It would have been much easier for Wynder to have forgotten what he saw in that autopsy. Indeed, everyone around him had done just that. Had convinced themselves of a certain delusion and lived accordingly. But he managed, somehow, not to be lulled back into complicity and complacency. Maybe he didn’t immediately notice the course of his future shifting, but he didn’t let the nagging memory of a pivotal revelation escape him. He kept following the bread crumbs. Kept pondering these things in his heart. Wynder, like Mary, probably like all of us at some point of another, was bold enough to believe in a truer version of reality. One closer to God’s dream for us. And believing that came with real costs.

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244
If we are looking to the world to validate our good news, to celebrate the new life bubbling up within us, we are likely to be sorely disappointed. Derided. Diminished. God’s best dreams are almost never welcome. They fly in the face of convention. They majorly undermine the consensus. And, because of this, they are rarely recognized in real time. But it is not simply unfortunate to miss them. Sticking our heads in the sand, avoiding, pretending … these can be life-threatening, soul-crushing habits. Far better to be the kind of person who actually believes an angel would visit, that God would choose you as a co-conspirator in saving the world, than to be lulled back into a world hostile to truth. Hostile to good news. Even when that good news is, actually, all around us just waiting to be discovered.

Soren Kirkegaard once famously said – a theological parallel of Mukherjee’s observation – that we do not fail to believe in God because there’s not enough evidence, but because there’s too much: an over-abundance that makes it hard to connect the dots. Christ is coming, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, ever and always, and when he comes it will seem an unwelcome, unanticipated interruption. It will be hard to connect the dots. So sing the songs. Steep in the stories. Settle into the miraculous way of Mary’s son - the way of a merciful God who scatters the proud and lifts up the lowly, a God who fills the hungry with good things, a God who keeps God’s promises - and wait for the new thing just on the horizon. You just might find yourself someday soon looking in your rearview mirror with a mix of awe, fear, wonder, and joy, at the precise moment God steered you into the adventure of a lifetime. Amen.