



*“The Annunciation”
from an
original woodcut
by
Elisabeth Reuter*

C is for Celebration

The coming of the Christ is a celebration. It is a celebration of his coming as a child to call us all to child-ness. It is a celebration of his coming again as our Friend and Lord.

We celebrate many gifts, including those of the two writers for this Advent/Christmas newsletter—Marie Schroeder and Cathy Lessmann. Marie, who recently celebrated her 75th birthday in style, was asked to share her gift in story of her encounter with an angel as also another happened to another mother, Mary the mother of our Lord. Cathy shares her gift regularly with the Crossings Community as our Administrator. With excitement, she shares about the second international Crossings Conference October 19-22, 2008. Save the date!

Celebrate their gifts as extensions of the Gift of Christmas!

Michael Hoy

R is for Revelation, as revealed to Mary and Marie, both Word-bearers

“God sent the angel Gabriel,” says the evangelist Luke, “to a virgin girl who lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. She was engaged to marry a man named Joseph from the family of David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, “Greetings! The Lord is with you; you are very special to him.” [Easy to Read Version]

I’ve known several people who say they’ve seen an angel. One saw an inexplicable light in a dark room. One saw only her feet as she tripped and began to tumble over a cliff, but instead of seeing, she rather felt an angel pushing on her forehead to get her back up top again.

I saw one too. Here’s my story.

When we lived for a while in Ethiopia, I learned to be wary of boys whose smiles were so charming, but who could snatch belongings like lightning in an unguarded moment. Little boys were the best at the job. I developed the habit of wearing my belt bag under a light jacket so it would be hidden, and I always snapped the jacket closed in front.

One day I walked away from the Lufthansa office on Addis Ababa’s main street, on a sidewalk crowded with mostly Ethiopian men speaking a language I didn’t know. I was a bit upset because I’d learned we’d have to spend \$300 to cover an inadvertant discrepancy between the date our visa expired and the date of our ticket home. That seemed like big money in this poor country. I had those expensive tickets and our grocery money with me, of course in the belt bag.

Suddenly a little Ethiopian boy came toward me; he couldn’t have been more than 6 years old. With a look of concern, and in perfect English, he said to

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me, “Madam, your purse is open.” I looked down and realized my belt bag was unzipped and my jacket was unbuttoned as well, an easy mark. As I started to zip the bag and the boy walked past me, I said with emphasis, “Thank you!” Then from behind me I heard him say, “I love you.” And when I looked behind me, he was gone.

You’re wondering why I think that was an angel with such a plebeian message, right? But why else would a little Ethiopian boy know perfect English? Why would he warn me to protect my money instead of planning to steal it? Why, especially, would he say those improbable words, “I love you”?

I was and am certainly nobody special. But whenever I think about it I feel incredibly loved because I take it as a message from God. God loves me.

O-S is for [God’s] Own Son, also Mary’s... and ours!

Mary received a much bigger message. God was choosing her to bear God’s son, the long-awaited savior for Israel and for the world, with no help from any other human. An impossible task, a frightening prospect. But with the angel’s further words she simply knew the job was hers. She trusted God’s word and God’s purpose and agreed to let God turn her world upside down.

What must that have been like? Every mother knows, either with fear, or with loathing, or with joy, what it is to feel a child grow inside her. Mary felt that too, probably even with morning sickness. Or sickness all day long! After all, that baby is a foreign body. A Congolese friend of ours told us that in his country people are very aware how dangerous it is to have one person grow inside of another person. When the birth happens, it is truly a “delivery” for the mother, a delivery from the danger that threatened her life. There’s surely some truth in that. And we use the same word.

But to know that the baby inside is God’s own implanting, God’s own purpose coming into being! How Mary must have pestered her husband Joseph, and maybe the teachers in the village, “What does the Torah say about the promised Messiah? What will the Messiah do, what will God do through God’s Messiah?” She needed to know what God’s purpose would be in all this. Was it up to her to protect this infant? Or would God take care of it no matter what happened?



Marie, Word-bearer

God did indeed care, as we know, and her son Jesus grew to be a most unusual man. So unusual and even strange, she may have thought, that perhaps her other children led her to doubt God’s purpose when she appeared with them at the fringe of the crowd listening to him teaching, wanting perhaps to take him safely home. Luke tells that story in what we know as chapter 8, as do the other gospel writers. But what a reminder

Jesus gave them! “My mother and my brothers are those who listen to God’s teaching and obey it.” Mother Mary, that’s just what you did before I was born! Remember! Don’t harbor doubts, only trust God, and trust that God is in me!

But when people turned against him, though he’d been walking through the whole country only three years, teaching his new message from God, he said, about the wrath to come and the love and forgiveness awaiting those who would believe his words -- how the bitterness and doubt must have been like acid in her mouth. How could they not see the Messiah in him, how could they resent his message for the poor when it was meant for them, too, poor in ways they refused to see? How could they desert the one who’d healed their friends and mothers?

How terrible it was for her then to see him die an agonizing and humiliating death on that Roman torture tower, that bloody cross. The shock must have overwhelmed her, or she surely would have been with the other women a few days later picking their way in the dark to find Jesus’ tomb and anoint his body, a task left unfinished before the Sabbath. When she did hear the news of his resurrection, probably from her

protector John, she'd had time to think, to remember, to "ponder," as Luke said in English 1600 years later. To John's news that Sunday I suspect she just smiled, maybe even laughed, and said, "I knew it!" Since then we've had plenty of time to think about these things too, to ponder along with Mary. And if, in spite of those who try to undermine our confidence, we still believe and trust that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, our hope and comfort in all of life, then we are blessed above all others.

Mary is sometimes called God-bearer. She was indeed. But it surely would sadden her to see how she is sometimes worshipped and praised, as if she was God's chosen redeemer herself instead of her son. She was nothing special, but was made special by the work God gave her to do. But as every mother knows, once the danger of birthing is past and the child is delivered, that child is given work from God to do completely apart from her. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self. Mary, most blessed, is first among Christ's worshippers.

S is for Song, this Christmas and throughout the year

One of my favorite Christmas hymns, one with a truly haunting melody, is a Basque carol:

"The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
with wings as drifted snow, with eyes as flame;
'All hail to thee, O lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favored lady.' Gloria!"

That's how Gabriel is usually pictured, isn't it? But since my days in Ethiopia, I have a different theory. There were no wings, snowy or otherwise, and no flaming eyes. Gabriel came in the form of a little boy, one Mary had never seen before. He sauntered up to Mary one morning as she stood in line in the village square to get her family's water from the village fountain. "Hi, Mary," the boy said. "Guess what!"

"Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
in Bethlehem all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world
will ever say:
'Most highly favored lady.' Gloria!"

Marie Schroeder

I is for "I am": Crossings Conference #2

Every time Crossings folks get together, as several of us did this summer for our annual board meeting, conversation inevitably turns to the condition of the church today. A lot of grief is expressed over the "cheapening" of the Gospel; we agonize over why that is.

We wonder, might the gospel be so diluted because the popular view of God is so diluted: diluted, that is, from the inscrutable, paradoxical God we meet in Scripture and, perhaps, in those rare honest moments of daily living: a God, on the one hand, who is genuinely angry enough to condemn sin in flesh and yet, on the other hand, who is surprisingly loving enough to take on that sinful flesh for the sake of its salvation. We hear slogans, like "God is good all the time; all the time God is good" and we ask, although pious, is that really honest to God? We see movies, like "Evan Almighty," which dilutes the meaning of Noah's ARK to God doing "Acts of Random Kindness" and we ask, although cute, is that really honest to God?

Hmmm.... Could be that's worth discussing, we concluded. Why not pick it as the topic for our next conference? So we did.

Our title **Who do you say 'I am': Getting Honest about God Today** encapsulates that very theme. I asked Steven Kuhl, our president, to expound on that and give us more of an idea of what to expect. His reply:

"The allusions to Exodus and Matthew (also John's "I Am" thematic) are intentional. Our goal is to explore, clarify and elucidate the "doctrine of God" (*De Deo*) that informs the law-gospel theological outlook, especially the "incredible duel" (as Luther calls it) between God's promise and God's judgment worked out in Christ on the Cross and the "happy exchange" (as Luther calls it) whereby our sins become Christ's and Christ's righteousness becomes ours through faith.

"Of course, as we do this, we will have our world in mind which also has all kinds of views about God: from intellectually convinced atheists to pluralistic theists to crusading monotheists to the kids I now have in my "Faith Development" class at Cardinal

Stritch University in Milwaukee who believe in God like they believe the earth is round--so what? We think this theme will address a real need, in our present socio-religious context, that the average Christian in the pew and pastor in the pulpit (our Crossings constituency) face in the course of carrying out their respective vocations today.

“The conference will be organized around three keynote presentations that are meant to coordinate like three legs of a stool to giving an "honest" answer to the *De Deo* question today. I [Steve Kuhl] will give the first presentation to set the theme about the hidden God in creation: the awesome God who creates all flesh is also the lawful, judging God who condemns sin in the flesh, a dialectical reality that is evident in the things of the world, but too overwhelming for humankind to entertain with its own resources (the "I am" of Exodus).

N is for *Notables* (who will be coming)

“We are pleased that John Strelan has agreed to make the trek all the way back from Australia to make the second presentation which will introduce the proclamation of the revealed God in Christ whose evangelical, merciful work subverts and overrules the work of the hidden God in creation, but does so in a way that is necessarily hidden under the cross (the "I am" of Matthew and John) -- a Gospel worth raving about!

“Mary Jane Dreier from Luther Seminary will introduce the third theme of the Christian life as a life led by the Holy Spirit, identified by faith in Christ, deployed (for mission) in the world to serve the one hidden-and-revealed, judging and promising God. These Christians are "little Christ's" in the world, who know something of Paul's confession, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20-21) As you can also see in this outline, the Trinity is integral to the meaning of 'I am.'”

These three themes will be fleshed out in numerous breakouts led by other can't-afford-to-miss speakers. For example, we've asked Fred Niedner to tackle the question “Is America's God more Yahweh or more Baal?” Sherman Lee will speak about “Conceptions

of God in Pop Culture.” John Strelan will address “God in a Godless Country.” Philip Kuehnert will grapple with “The Question of God in Pastoral Care.” Kit Kleinhans (another of our popular keynoters from the last conference) will talk about “Discipleship and Equipping the Saints.” Then of course, no Crossings conference will be complete without our feisty, cherished, Ed Schroeder. But even then there's more! Michael Hoy, Marcus Felde, Robin Morgan, Lori Cornell, Gary Simpson, and a few others yet to be confirmed are being lined up. Check our website in January for many more details.

G-S is for *Grab Somebody,* *joyously, to come along and share*

Interwoven throughout the conference will be our attempt to respond to a recurring comment we received after the last conference -- “I wish I could have learned more about how you link faith with daily life.” So, we built in sessions throughout the two days aimed at doing exactly that, to be taught by some of the Crossings folks who write Sabbathologies and preach from them. This emphasis is intended also and especially for the lay folk we hope will attend the conference. Towards that end, please, if you are a pastor, don't come alone—bring a handful of your members!

We changed the season from winter to fall to make traveling in snow a non-deterrent. The conference will be October 19-22, 2008, the first day being a learn-the-Crossings method pre-conference. Once again, we will be at the beautiful Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center in Belleville, Illinois where we can enjoy the beautiful setting of rolling hills and colorful foliage at that time of year.

What can you do? Well, first of all, plan to attend. Second, help us promote the conference. Third, bring friends. Fourth, if you can, help underwrite our expenses. We're excited and hope you are too.

Cathy Lessmann

Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.