

**“SMALL STEPS.....HEROIC STEPS”**

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE (1:26-38)  
AND PRESENTED AT ORLEAN UMC ON DECEMBER 21,  
2014----ADVENT #4**

**WE AMERICANS HAVE BEEN CAPTIVATED BY THE  
FANTASY OF CHRISTMAS FOR SOME TIME NOW..... WE  
HAVE APPLAUDED NUMEROUS CHILDREN IN  
COUNTLESS PRODUCTIONS OF TCHAIKOVSKY’S  
*NUTCRACKER* BALLET WITH ITS MICE WHO TURN INTO  
FIERCE WARRIORS, ITS SUGAR PLUM FAIRY AND  
DANCING FLOWERS, ITS UGLY NUTCRACKER TOY THAT  
BECOMES A HANDSOME PRINCE..... WE HAVE  
ENJOYED MULTIPLE RETELLINGS OF CHARLES  
DICKENS’ *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* ----ONE OF MY  
FAVORITES -----AND IMAGINED AGAIN, WITH SHIVERS  
CRAWLING UP OUR SPINES, THE GHOSTS THAT MR.  
SCROOGE ENCOUNTERS —**

**THE GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST, CHRISTMAS  
PRESENT, CHRISTMAS FUTURE..... WE HAVE  
STAYED UP LATE TO SEE, JUST ONE MORE TIME,  
GEORGE BAILEY, PLAYED BY JIMMY STEWART, LIVE  
THROUGH THE NIGHTMARE OF VIEWING A WORLD IN  
WHICH HE NEVER EXISTED IN *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*.  
AND WE HAVE CHEERED AND CRIED WHEN HE AND HIS  
WIFE, PLAYED BY THE LOVELY, NEVER-CHANGING  
DONNA REED, RECEIVED THEIR FRIENDS AND THEIR  
MONEY THAT BAILED THEM OUT OF THEIR FINANCIAL  
CRISIS. WE HAVE TAUGHT OUR CHILDREN TO LOOK FOR  
SANTA CLAUS AND FLYING REINDEER AND SNOWMEN  
WHO COME TO LIFE AND ANIMALS WHO SPEAK ENGLISH  
ON CHRISTMAS EVE. WE LOVE THE FANTASIES OF  
CHRISTMAS, SO MUCH SO THAT WE ALMOST BELIEVE  
THAT IN FANTASY IS FOUND CHRISTMAS JOY.**

**SOMETIMES WE TREAT THE ANGEL GABRIEL AND MARY AS IF THEY WERE AS MUCH CREATURES OF CHRISTMAS FANTASY AS THE SUGAR PLUM FAIRY AND FROSTY THE SNOWMAN..... AFTER ALL, FEW IF ANY OF US HAVE EVER SEEN AN ANGEL! -----CERTAINLY NOT A GABRIEL AS HE IS DEPICTED IN THE MYRIAD OF PICTURES PRODUCED BY CHRISTIAN ARTISTS FOR CENTURIES.....GABRIEL WITH A GLISTENING HALO AROUND HIS HEAD AND HUGE WINGS PROTRUDING FROM HIS SHOULDERS..... GABRIEL DRESSED IN BRIGHTLY COLORED ROBES AND APPEARING OUT OF NOWHERE INTO THE LIFE OF A YOUNG WOMAN.**

**ALTHOUGH IN THE MODERN ERA WE HAVE PACIFIED  
OUR IMAGES OF ANGELS, IN THE ANCIENT WORLD THEY  
WERE WARRIORS FIGHTING IN THE HEAVENLY HOSTS  
AND MESSENGERS WITH AN AWESOME, AWE-INSPIRING  
MESSAGE FROM THE LORD..... AND THEY WERE  
ALWAYS MALE IN THE ANCIENT LITERATURE IN WHICH  
THEY APPEARED..... BUT IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT  
THIS ANGELIC LITERATURE IS ACTUALLY QUITE SCARCE  
AND UNCOMMON..... EVEN IN THE BIBLE, ANGELS  
SHOW UP ONLY ON THE EDGES OF THE NARRATIVES;  
THEY ARE NEVER CENTRAL CHARACTERS AND ARE  
HARDLY EVER DESCRIBED IN ANY DETAIL. THEY ARE  
INDEED FANTASTIC, MYSTERIOUS CREATURES!**

**AND MARY? WAY TOO OFTEN SHE SEEMS  
OTHERWORLDLY BECAUSE WE MAKE HER TOO GOOD  
TO BE TRUE. FOR CENTURIES WE HAVE CARRIED  
AROUND AN IMAGE OF HER AS SO PURE, SO FAITHFUL,  
SO OBEDIENT AND SO INNOCENT THAT WE HAVE A  
DIFFICULT TIME CONNECTING TO HER AS ANOTHER  
HUMAN BEING..... SHE WALKS AT LEAST 10 FEET  
ABOVE THE GROUND AND HER FEET NEVER GET DIRTY  
IN OUR POPULAR DEPICTIONS..... HER FACE IS ALWAYS  
BEAUTIFUL, HER MANNER IS ALWAYS CALM AND  
PLEASING, HER HAIR IS IN PLACE AND HER EYES ARE  
LOCKED ON THINGS ABOVE..... SHE IS NO ONE WE  
KNOW AND NO ONE TO WHOM WE CAN RELATE.  
CERTAINLY, SHE IS UNLIKE ANY 14- OR 15-YEAR-OLD  
GIRL WE MIGHT RECOGNIZE IN OUR LIVES.**

**WE HAVE MADE HER A CREATURE OF FANTASY, AS SURELY AS THE ANGEL GABRIEL SEEMS TO BE AND AS DEFINITELY AS A FLYING REINDEER AND A NUTCRACKER PRINCE ARE. THEY ARE CHARACTERS IN REALLY GOOD ADVENTUROUS YARNS, BUT THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH US.**

**AND YET, IF WE STRIP AWAY THE OVERLAY OF CENTURIES OF INTERPRETATIONS OF MARY, CENTURIES OF PAINTINGS AND ARTISTIC RENDITIONS, AND IF WE TRY AGAIN TO SEE HER AS THE SIMPLE YOUNG GIRL SHE WAS, WE MIGHT FIND MORE THAN A FANTASTIC CREATURE IN ANOTHER UNREALISTIC CHRISTMAS STORY. WE MIGHT FIND A MODEL OF FAITHFULNESS THAT WE CAN NOT ONLY ADMIRE FROM AFAR BUT IMITATE UP CLOSE.**

**FIRST, NOTE HOW SMALL THINGS REALLY ARE IN THE EVENT THAT LUKE DESCRIBES HERE..... IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE OF THE FIRST CENTURY, GALILEE WAS NEXT TO NOWHERE AND NAZARETH WAS ONLY ONE OF ITS MANY INSIGNIFICANT VILLAGES..... A VIRGIN WAS AMONG THE MOST UNIMPORTANT HUMAN BEINGS IN THE SOCIETY — AN UNMARRIED, UNFRUITFUL YOUNG WOMAN WHOSE PARENTS WERE SO INCONSEQUENTIAL THAT THEY HAVE NO NAMES, AT LEAST GIVEN IN LUKE’S ACCOUNT..... LUKE ALSO OMITTS ANY MENTION OF WHETHER OR NOT SHE WAS VIRTUOUS, WHETHER OR NOT SHE WAS FAITHFUL TO GOD, WHETHER OR NOT SHE WAS KIND TO OTHERS. THERE WAS NO HONOR, NO STATUS, NO GREATNESS HERE. JUST A GIRL IN A BACKWATER PLACE.**

**HOW OFTEN DO WE FEEL LIKE “JUST A NOBODY” IN A NOWHERE PLACE? HOW COULD GOD CALL THAT GIRL OF NAZARETH TO BE FAITHFUL? HOW COULD GOD CALL US?**

**BUT AFTER NOTING HOW SMALL THIS SETTING AND THIS CHARACTER REALLY ARE, NOTICE WHAT GREAT CLAIMS ARE MADE..... GABRIEL, THE WARRIOR-MESSENGER-ANGEL, GREETED MARY LIKE A QUEEN..... AND THEN HE PROCLAIMED HER THE MOTHER OF “THE SON OF THE MOST HIGH,” THE HEIR OF “THE THRONE OF DAVID,” A KING “OF WHOSE KINGDOM THERE WILL BE NO END.”**



**AND THIS WOULD COME ABOUT AS THIS NEGLIGIBLE VIRGIN WAS TO BE “OVERSHADOWED” BY THE VERY POWER OF THE MOST HIGH GOD — THE MOST SIGNIFICANT, MOST CONSEQUENTIAL, MOST IMPORTANT BEING IN THE UNIVERSE.**

**DOES GOD NOT ALSO INVITE US INTO SOMETHING AWESOME AND MAJESTIC? DOES GOD NOT ALSO MAKE EXTRAVAGANT PROMISES TO US ABOUT BLESSING AND ETERNAL LIFE?**

**SO MARY, THE SMALL AND MEEK, WAS TO ENCOUNTER THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY, THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE, AND BECOME, JUST LIKE THAT, THE MOTHER OF GOD’S CHILD..... AND THEN SHE DOES THE ONE THING THAT MATTERS IN THIS WHOLE ACCOUNT.**

**SHE DOES THE ONE THING THAT CAN ADVANCE THIS  
PLOT FROM FANTASY INTO REAL LIFE..... SHE SAYS,  
“OKAY.” -----THAT’S ALL. AND THAT IS EVERYTHING.**

**BECAUSE WHEN SHE SAYS, “OKAY,” SHE TAKES THE  
FIRST SMALL BUT AMAZINGLY HEROIC STEP INTO THE  
DESTINY OF GOD. AND THAT FIRST STEP WOULD LEAD  
TO A THOUSAND MORE STEPS THROUGH A  
SCANDALOUS PREGNANCY, A DIFFICULT BIRTH IN A  
BARN OR A CAVE OR SOME OTHER SIMILAR  
ACCOMMODATION----- THE PERILS OF HER SON’S  
CHILDHOOD, HIS REJECTION OF HER HOME AS HE SET  
OUT TO CHANGE THE WORLD, HER EMBRACE OF HIS  
BROKEN, LIFELESS BODY.**

**AND SUDDENLY, WHEN WE CONSIDER ALL THAT, WHAT  
LOOKED LIKE FANTASY BECOMES REALITY. IT  
BECOMES OUR REALITY.**

**FOR ALL OF US FACE A HUNDRED CHOICES EVERY DAY  
TO ADVANCE GOD'S PLOT LINE INTO OUR WORLD, OR  
TO STYMIE IT WITH OUR OWN SELF-CENTERED DESIRES,  
OUR OWN DESPAIR, OUR OWN FAITHLESSNESS.....**

**SO WE CHOOSE, OVER AND OVER, TO SAY, "OKAY"  
WITH MARY; TO SAY WITH HER, "USE ME IN THIS  
MOMENT EVEN THOUGH I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT  
HAPPENS NEXT."**

**THAT IS THE MEANING OF FAITH AND IT IS THE PRACTICE OF HOPE..... SO MANY OF US TAKE THESE SMALL STEPS EVERY DAY: THE PARKINSON'S PATIENT WHO WAKES UP EVERY MORNING AND WITH COURAGE PLACES HIS FEET ON THE GROUND AND STARTS THE STRUGGLE OF GETTING DRESSED; THE MOTHER WITH THE AUTISTIC CHILD WHO ONCE AGAIN RUNS TO STOP HIM FROM BANGING HIS HEAD AGAINST THE WALL; THE TEACHER WHO FACES A CLASSROOM OF SEEMINGLY INDIFFERENT STUDENTS AND TRIES AGAIN TO SAY SOMETHING THAT WILL TURN THEM ON TO LEARNING; THE TEENAGER WHO WALKS BACK INTO THE SCHOOL FULL OF PEOPLE WHO LAUGHED AT HIM JUST YESTERDAY. SMALL STEPS, BUT INCREDIBLY HEROIC STEPS.**

**PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEY HAVE A CHOICE, AS MARY DID, BUT CHOOSE TO MOVE FORWARD INTO WHATEVER FUTURE GOD HOLDS OUT FOR THEM — AND US.**

**THESE, LIKE MARY, ARE THE TRUE HEROES OF CHRISTMAS, NOT BECAUSE THEY PARTICIPATE IN SOMETHING FANTASTIC AND SOMETHING BEYOND THE REALITY WE SHARE AS HUMAN BEINGS, BUT BECAUSE EVERY DAY THEY LIVE OUT THE LIFE GOD HAS GIVEN THEM WITH COURAGE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL THEIR LIVES MAY SEEM AT THE MOMENT.**

**IN JUST A FEW DAYS IT WILL BE CHRISTMAS MORNING. IF WE'RE LUCKY THIS YEAR, WE'LL CELEBRATE IT WITH IMAGINATIONS FULL OF MAGIC AND FANTASY AND "VISIONS OF SUGAR PLUMS DANCING IN OUR HEADS."**

**IF WE ARE LUCKY, WE WILL HAVE LOTS OF FUN THIS**  
**YEAR AND BE A BIT HAPPIER FOR IT..... BUT SOME**  
**AMONG US WILL NOT BE SO FORTUNATE..... SOME**  
**OF US WILL KNOW THAT CHRISTMAS MORNING, LIKE**  
**EVERY OTHER MORNING, BRINGS ITS OWN**  
**CHALLENGES, RESPONSIBILITIES, EVEN HEARTACHES.**  
**AND IF WE ARE AMONG THEM, WE MAY BE WEIGHED**  
**DOWN BY THE BURDENS WE CARRY.**

**REGARDLESS OF OUR OUTWARD CIRCUMSTANCES, ALL**  
**OF US WILL HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SAY WITH**  
**MARY ONCE AGAIN, “OKAY, GOD. WE’RE WITH YOU ALL**  
**THE WAY.” LIKE HER, WE WILL HAVE THE CHANCE TO**  
**ACT OUT OUR COMMITMENT IN SMALL HEROIC STEPS.**

**AND WHEN WE TAKE THOSE STEPS, AND ALL THE  
OTHERS ON OUR JOURNEY TOWARD MARY'S SON,  
JESUS, WE WILL LEARN THAT HAPPINESS, SADNESS  
AND ALL OTHER EMOTIONS, ARE NOTHING COMPARED  
TO THE TRUE JOY THAT GOD IS OFFERING THIS  
CHRISTMAS, AND EVERY CHRISTMAS.**

**MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR ME.....AMEN**