

God's Entrance

Luke 1:26-56

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*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances.*

-William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, (II,7)

The old adage “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” is never more true than in the theater. Dramatists have long known that how a leading character is first introduced to the audience is essential in how the audience understands the character for the rest of the play.

On a traditional proscenium stage, standard entrances by the characters are from center stage left and center stage right. But occasionally, there is a character of such standing that their entrance calls for something more. The ultimate grand entrance, reserved for kings and queens and other larger than life characters, is upstage center.

If you would like to view a traditional upstage center entrance by a king or queen in films, I suggest you look on YouTube at the entrance by Kenneth Branagh playing the king in his 1989 film of Shakespeare's, *Henry V*. In the throne room, the characters turn and look, the camera shifts so we see from their point of view, and upstage center in the distance of a large, darkened room, a massive door opens with light shining through and in the distance is a lone character, in

silhouette wearing a long cape. The camera does not move, as the character walks into the throne room to dramatic effect. There is no doubt the king has entered.

Or I suggest you view, Cate Blanchett as Queen Elizabeth I in her 1998 film, *Elizabeth*. Her big entrance is at the end, rather than the beginning. The film is about this young, somewhat care-free girl becoming queen in a sixteenth century male dominated world beset by those trying to use her and those wishing to destroy her and even destroy England. At the climax of the movie, young Elizabeth has grown and transformed – both by forces outside of her and by her determined responses to those forces. The scene is a crowd in the throne room, upstage center a curtain opens with blinding light shining through and slowly a figure emerges. Young Elizabeth is changed. She slowly walks forward, skin whitened to dramatic effect with white makeup, no more girlish locks but now a wig and crown, and elaborately decorated gown, she steps forward with the most serious visage. With no prompting, the crowd parts and bows. Everyone is in awe; the audience is in awe. Mozart's *Requiem* is playing as she moves to the throne and is seated. The camera zooms in, the music reaches crescendo – this is Elizabeth the First, the Queen of England and Ireland.

I suppose the most over-the-top entrance I've seen on video is Vladimir Putin's entrance to the Kremlin for one of his inaugurations several years ago. Using all the marks for eye and ear, everything learned from stage and screen, it is upstage center on steroids. Five minutes of him alone walking down long red carpeted hallways with Russian army guards goosestepping to open massive golden doors for him, finally he enters the big room with adoring crowds clapping and walks up the raised stage.

So here's my question: how does God make an entrance?

How does the Creator God of the Heavens and the Earth, Very God of Very God, Light of Light, begotten, not created, enter this worldly stage?

Matt Perry and I played with this idea this earlier this week. Picture upstage center a large stairway going upwards, bathed in lights with gleaming gold decorations. At the top is a massive double door also in gold. Armed guards attentive in their elaborate uniforms line the stairs and at the bottom are crowds of fully festooned Kings and Queens, Emperors and Empresses, Caesars, Autocrats, Dictators, Presidents, Premiers, Prime Ministers, and lots of Generals in full uniforms, medals and gold braid, all looking expectantly up to the golden double doors.

Downstage left, perhaps on the lower apron, almost in the shadows is a commonly dressed old woman and beside her in worn, perhaps hand-me-down clothing is a teenaged girl. Both dark-skinned Jewish women. Are they part of the cast? Maids or servants of some sort? Perhaps they are stagehands who have made a grievous mistake and crossed the line from backstage to onstage caught up in the grand entrance of God?

But we are to keep our eyes downstage. Luke tells us that God is entering downstage. While we're looking for God in all the wrong places, God is making God's entrance and it is nothing we're expecting. While all the attention is upstage center, God is coming downstage. While we're caught up in the newsfeeds and reports and stories over the internet. The television talk shows with their breaking reports are all about Washington and Mar-a-Lago and Moscow. Meanwhile, Luke alone, tells us a different story. God is making God's entrance and it begins with these two women, Elizabeth and Mary, downstage in the shadows.

Here is where God is entering our broken world.

This is where we must learn to look and see – downstage, on the edge, among the margins. And it takes effort and training and learning new habits to be able watch the action downstage while all the lights and spectacle is upstage center. And make no mistake, staging is all about guiding the audience, so we'll see certain things while ignoring others.

This week, my old friend and old friend to this church, Ken Sehested in Asheville, NC wrote of his early days right out of seminary when he had a job as a typesetter in a print shop. This was back before word processing and desktop publishing. Ken did everything by hand – and by sight.

He wrote, “In the process, my eyes learned to distinguish between dozens of different typefaces. Before long, I was identifying fonts—Helvetica, Times, Cooper Black, Palatino, etc.—used in everything from billboards to television ads to all manner of printed material.” He went on, “I would have paid little attention to such information had I not been required to train the eye.” And he added, “You would be surprised what can be seen when the eyes are tutored to find certain objects and ignore others.”

Much of the rest of his fascinating article is about neuroscience and vision, the brain and how we see. Ken summarizes, “Our eyes and brains can be trained to ‘see’ certain things, ignore other things, alternately with prejudicial or preferable evaluation” (see Ken Sehested, *Prayer and Politics*, December 22, 2023, “Reading Christmas Through the Lens of Advent’s Anguish,” www.prayerandpolitics.org).

I’m bringing all this up because much of what we do here at Austin Heights is training our eyes and brains to see certain things and to quit focusing our attention on others. If all we see is upstage center, we will easily believe that’s all that’s going on in the world. Upstage center is where the kings and dictators rule,

where corporations dominate, and where the news is focused. If that's all we see, the result will be distraction, diminishment, dehumanization, destruction, disconnection, and despair. We end up giving up hope and withdraw into our little cocoons, and the Powers of Death and Domination get what they want.

So, it is important, essential that we train the eye to look downstage. Because according to Luke that's where God is entering this world. God is intervening and invading through these two women.

Elizabeth and Mary live on the margins of that first-century Palestinian world, with few rights and no power and no influence. Elizabeth is elderly. She and her old husband Zechariah have no children, which also means they will likely have a bleak old age. No future. No hope. No one to care for them when they can no longer care for themselves. In that day and time, children were essentially their version of Social Security.

Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel visited the old couple and promised that they were going to have a baby who will grow up to be John the Baptizer.

Mary is Elizabeth's cousin. She too is marginalized and powerless. Poor, young, and not yet married. And the angel Gabriel visits her when Elizabeth is six months pregnant. You can imagine how even more marginalizing it is for Mary when in a few verses she shows up pregnant, out of wedlock. What is incredibly amazing to me, is her willingness to trust God. She says, "I know this is going to be hard, very hard, but I'm willing to see where this will lead."

My oh my, what a story! And we would have missed it if Luke hadn't reported it and we were not learning to look for it. God comes to these two unlikely characters, these two women – one elderly without hope and one young without

security, telling them they each are going to have a baby. One too old to conceive and the other a virgin who cannot conceive. – get ready – it’s inconceivable!

You never know where and to whom God might show up. The story of the redemption and hope and healing of our world begins with God bypassing upstage center, ignoring the spotlights and the powerful and the influencers, entering through these two women.

This is not a story about us trying harder, working longer, or organizing smarter. It is not about us climbing up to God. This is a story about God coming down to us. It’s all God’s doing, God takes the initiative and God shows up wherever we least expect it. We call it grace.

And it is a story about whom God calls. Just like long ago at the beginning of Exodus, the great story of redemption and hope in the Older Testament, God calls two young midwives Shiphrah and Puah to resist Pharaoh, another political star of stage and screen who liked to be upstage center in the spotlight. God called and used Shiphrah and Puah to save baby Moses and begin God’s great work of salvation and liberation.

This time God calls Elizabeth and Mary. Two more women who trusted God more than they trusted their fears.

Back to Ken and Nancy Sehested. After typesetting and a couple of other things Ken became the Exec. Dir. of the newly organized Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Nancy Sehested was the associate pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta, and already a preacher of stunning power. I was a young intern with Ken. This was 1985, and Nancy was plowing particularly rough ground as one of the handful of ordained women clergy in Southern Baptist life. I asked

Nancy why she chose to be a preacher. She laughed her powerful laugh and said, “Choose? You think I’d choose to put myself through all this? You think I would choose having the Southern Baptist Convention come down on my head, having articles written about me, and putting me through the ringer with mean, hate-filled letters I receive? I didn’t choose this. I was called. God called me.”

Hear me, especially you women. Young women and old women, but also young men and old men. If you are someone who has been pushed to the margins, silenced by the cruelty or power or ignorance and arrogance of others, told that you don’t count because you are not upstage center, you had better pay careful attention to this Advent story. You had better be careful because God enters, and God calls.

The angel Gabriel appears to young Mary and the first thing angels always say in the Bible is “Fear not,” or “Be not afraid,” because angels are terrifying. Emily Dickinson called them “bisecting messengers” because they bisect heaven and earth, life and death, judgement and mercy. Representing God, they intervene, intrude, and otherwise upend.

Gabriel shows up to teenager Mary calling her and saying God is on the move. God is entering this world and God is going to enter it through you. “So, come on! But pack light. God wants you to join the God Movement, the revolution.” Mary says, “But there is no God Movement.” And Gabriel says, “There will be after you get it started. Or rather you allow God to start it through you. So come on!”

All this is inconceivable to me! It’s simply extraordinary! Or as the angel Gabriel says, “Nothing is impossible with God!”

Mary says, “Yes, I’ll do it. Here am I, the servant of God. Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:37-38).

Then she bursts out in song. Now, I’m a preacher partial to preachers like John the Baptist, but I’m the first to admit, sometimes, our faith is better sung than said. There are times when singing is the only response no matter if we’re good at it or not. Here at Austin Heights, we sing! And as I said, what we do here is train you to see but singing is another way we learn to see. We sing the faith! Some things are worth singing about and the intervention of God into this world is up at the top of the list.

And my heavens, Luke is full of singing. The whole story Luke tells of the annunciation and birth of Jesus is packed with singing. Earlier old Zechariah hears that he will be a daddy and he sings. Then Elizabeth learns that she will be a mother and she sings. Mary sings. Of course, the angels sing! And later Simeon sings! Everybody sings!

Mary bursts forth, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

In her saying yes and singing, Mary becomes the premier disciple, a model disciple. She was the first person to hear the announcement that God is entering this world to be with us, and she is the very first to believe. Martin Luther once said in a Christmas sermon, three miracles occurred at Christ’s nativity: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. Luther said that the greatest miracle of the three was that Mary believed. Despite all the darkness, despair, brick walls, blind alleys, and cold silent death, she believed! And she sang!

Furthermore, this is no lullaby Mary sings. The words thunder forth like a battle chant: *“He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones . . . and the rich he has sent empty away.”*

This is not a sweet little Christmas carol! This is a song about those on the bottom going up, and those who are “high and mighty” being brought low. This is revolutionary singing. The kind tyrants outlaw!

“Music hath charms to soothe a savage beast,” said William Congreve. That is true, but it also has the power to empower, to release, to cut loose, to pull down and raise up, to heal and to give hope!

Downstage this singing breaks forth and soon the audience is joining in. God is entering this world and turning it upside down. The revolution is beginning and all of us want to get in on it. Meanwhile, those who are upstage center, discover they’re the ones who are fixing to be brought low, and they don’t like it. “Let’s shut up that singing! Let’s suppress it, outlaw it, deny it, lie about it, and do whatever else we can to keep those people quiet!”

But downstage Mary sings and it spreads. Pretty soon people start dancing and poets start writing. People dream of a different life to the one dictated by upstage center. Despair is shattered, hope shines forth, people get involved. All because of singing!

Tonight, all over the world there will be singing. King Herod still rages, and people still grieve and people suffer, but there still is singing. All the pain and darkness and evil in this old world tries to silence the singing but somehow, someone keeps on with the songs. Not ignoring the pain and grief, but in the face

of it! Just when upstage center thinks, or perhaps, we think, that the singing is finally silenced – someone sings – downstage, defiantly, hopefully, from their heart, from their bones.

In first-century Judea, in the December nights, people were shut up in their darkened houses for fear of Roman soldiers. The streets were deserted and the whole countryside was fearfully quiet. But in the dark silence, a pure, clear, feminine voice cuts through the night: *“My soul magnifies the Lord . . . He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree.”*

And what about us? This is a tough Advent and Christmas. We’re worried. Afraid of the future, wars around the world, more gun violence, climate change, racism, refugees, and the rise of fascism.

But we sing. Faithfully, stubbornly, and defiantly, we sing. Yes, we sing because we believe. We have hope. And we believe because we sing.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

God is entering.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.