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### **Veni: Random God**

#### **By Matt Hook on Luke 1:26-38**

Growing up in Birmingham First United Methodist Church, we did a Christmas pageant every year. Here are some random, funny things I remember from it: Norris Lee was the angel Gabriel. He was a tall, skinny, middle-aged bald guy and the first few years he wore a curly blond wig. Even the adults couldn't keep a straight face. After a while, they let the youth be the actors. One year, I was Gabriel (minus the curly blond wig—of course today I could probably use one!), and my sister Jaema was Mary. I only found out later how appalled the director was one year when my sister as Mary was wearing hot red nail polish. (Now it's one of her favorite stories). One year the baby supposed to play Jesus was screaming, so they switched it to a doll, but my mom was determined to have a live baby Jesus. So in the middle of the performance, she snuck out into the congregation and found a quiet baby and swapped that real baby for the doll when no one was looking. You should have seen the director's face when the doll started moving by itself! It was the old fashioned kind of pageant, with the senior pastor narrating the whole thing from Luke and Matthew's Gospels in the balcony. The choirs would all sing various songs throughout, and the "actors" (using the term loosely) would do their motions, tableau-like. So, like, the most movement we ever saw was when the choir of angels made their entrance, we had 2 of the 10 shepherds quivering like this (DEMO). (Those were the dramatic ones!) The next biggest action sequence was when Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her as a virgin that she is going to have God's Son. Here was the sum total of Mary's reaction. (DEMO). (This took years of training). I have to admit, though, the Kings' entrance was pretty cool. As the youth minister there, I got to play a king. I grew a goatee for it, but just before we made our entrance, the three little kids who were the "pages" carrying the gifts for the kings all thought I looked like Jafar from the Disney movie Aladdin...how random.

If you really think about it, Christmas is very random. It's nothing we could have cooked up. It's all God, which means it's sheer grace. A God-thing. It simply "of-God." (How else could it have survived all the pageants we attempt? ☺) The reality of Christmas is kind of wild and strange. Random. My wife Leigh always says "That's random" when something strange or off-the-wall happens. That's Christmas. Maybe it's the randomness of God's grace that makes us want to tame it. (Tableau-style). We've tried to make it habitable. We've roofed it in and furnished it. We've reduced it to what makes us comfortable. I fear we've done that with our faith itself. I fear we've done that with our very lives! Reduced them to something so different from how God intended, that we're missing the mark on God's best. I also think a tamed faith is not going to be prepared for what we're facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

If Christmas is all it's cracked up to be, of course even our best attempts miss the mark. Think about it: the infinite God—the Word—always existing, ever-complete before anything came into being—the One who brought everything into being—became flesh. As one drama puts it, the Toymaker became a toy, to win back all the other toys, and show them how to live as they were created to live. God became human. Ultimate Mystery born totally dependent on someone to feed him, wash him,

change him, hold him. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is great and terrifying. The darkness of the world split open with riveting light. Like the Nicene Creed puts it: “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God...who for us and our salvation...came down from heaven.” Think about it—the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to deliver this message...and the whole future of creation hung now on a 12 or 13 year old girl—named Mary. Now *that’s* random...

We have some unlearning to do. If we are to carry the message into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; if we are to impact the time given to *us* with the Gospel, we have to say good bye to our tame faith. The world isn’t interested in Christianity because we Christians aren’t known as people who live what we say. People aren’t interested in Christianity, but they are *dying* to know what *God* is like. *God has* to be real. Yes, God is random, but in truth, God is extremely practical, all because of Christmas. Because Jesus is God in taking on flesh and blood, he shows us what God is like. So in his generosity, in his compassion, *that’s what God’s like*. In his love, and forgiveness, and sacrifice, that’s what God is like. That’s who God is. Random, huh? Jesus was a visual demonstration of God’s power.

Here’s how Luke tells it, in 1:26-38: “*In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

*28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." 34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God."*

*38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her."*

God must have thought a lot of Mary, for her to carry the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, inside her. Now, the message from the angel was not initially “good news” at all. It was totally random. From Mary’s cultural perspective, becoming pregnant while only betrothed could, at worst, result in death by stoning for adultery. Best case would be for life long stigma that would prevent her from ever marrying. Mary’s ordinary and uneventful life was gone, and her son would be labeled the illegitimate son of Mary. Her life would be changed forever.

God knows all this. So listen to what He does. He has Gabriel, the angel, tell Mary about Elizabeth. He encourages Mary in the midst of this moment: Elizabeth, her relative, is also expecting. Elizabeth’s life of faith now becomes like a flashlight showing Mary she’s not alone as she will have to walk by faith, not by sight. I think Mary’s hope came from first, the miracle of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, but more importantly, from Elizabeth’s life of faith. Mary saw it lived out. Just like people today need. There’s a lot of power in encouragement. When you’re down, or lost, or lonely, or hopeless, and someone comes along with the right word, or idea, or friendship. A simple act of love. It’s like they had the power to move the darkness of your night and hand you a sunrise; and you move from despair to hope. And just to clarify God’s meaning, the angel tells Mary that “nothing is impossible with God.” Let me say that again! What miracle or encouragement have you

been keeping to yourself? Isn't it time to share it with someone, no matter how random it may seem? There's a lot of power in encouragement. Do you exercise that power?

The impact of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy is obvious. Mary replies in a spirit of submission and faith to the angel by declaring "*I am the Lord's servant...may it be as you have said.*"

The biggest changes happen inside-out, don't they? It's the same with our faith. It's *not* just an inside thing. (If it were, God would never have made it so practical by coming to earth). On the other hand, it's not just a bunch of new rules or some new religion you go through the motions to do. So what does it mean to follow Christ? Like Mary, it's a change that begins inside and grows. And that changes everything. And when it's God, there's usually something pretty random about it. Have you claimed God's new reality in your life, like Mary did? Are you living out of it, or out of your old habits?

Now listen to this: Mary practiced radical obedience, despite how random God chose to act. Imagine if we lived with the same radical obedience? Imagine if you had the integrity of lifestyle that Mary had, rather than just giving lip service or occasional attention to our faith? Think that'd have an impact? Imagine a whole church of people interacting and encouraging others based on their heart relationship with God. Do you think that would speak to your friends and neighbors? Jesus said "*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*" (John 3:17).

God must have thought a lot of Mary, for her to carry the second person of the Trinity. But how random is this: God must think a lot of you, for you to carry the third person of the Trinity. When you put your faith in Christ, His Holy Spirit, the mind of Christ, God-with-us, dwells in you. How will you respond? Like nothing's changed? You'll just get caught up in all the stuff you've always been caught up in, doing all the stuff you used to do in order to fill yourself with meaning...now *that's* random!

Or, do you realize nothing's the same anymore. Like Mary. Talk about out of your comfort zone! DID MARY HAVE A CHOICE? Yes. She could have gotten rid of the baby. She could have destroyed herself, or walked away. She could have busied herself with all kinds of other things. But she didn't. How about you? What choice have you made? Remember—God views you JUST AS SPECIAL as Mary. On Friday, my daughter Joy asked us if she could be Mary for our Christmas Eve worship service. Leigh told her probably not, that an older girl would likely be Mary. But from now on, I make this declaration. Every one of you gets to be Mary. Every day! Live it out! Because God invites you to be the recipient of God's special grace, that we know as the Holy Spirit. So you, too, can carry the flesh and blood hope, love, forgiveness, sacrifice, friendship, generosity, and compassion of what God is like.

When Mary heard all of this, she said "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said.*" But later Jesus told his disciples: "*No longer do I call you servants...instead I call you friends...love each other.*" (John 15:15, 17). You not only can be the Lord's servant, you can be his friend. How cool—and how random is that?