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If An Angel Came to You...

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Text: Luke 1:39-55 (The Annunciation)

I want to start out this morning by standing up before you and making an apology. I know that it is not the normal way to start a homily, but I feel it is something I must do. I want to tell you how sorry I am that the Bible, and the faith, and the Christian life do not always make sense. I wish I could tell you that you could sit down at a cardtable with Christianity, like you would with a jigsaw puzzle, and with enough persistence and organization make a nice clear picture out of it that you could mount on a piece of glass and hang on the wall for easy reference. I know that many of you would find that very comforting. Unfortunately, that isn't even remotely possible.

Christian life is a life that is full of surprises, and often many risks. While we can plot a course into the mist with the Bible and the lives of the saints, we still have to sail out into the unknown. Why would we need faith if Christianity were just a matter of following the manual? God is wonderful, and alive, and filled with mystery. God is just enormously too great to be pinned down within the confines of any neat pigeonhole concepts we might produce to help us feel that somehow we really are in control after all. No system, no matter how clever, will ever entrap God.

Another thing I would like to apologize for is the fact that God will someday have justice done here on earth. I'm really sorry but I'm afraid that means that one day we will have to pay for the lavish lifestyle we live while others in the world go without freedom, clothing, security, food, stability, homes, or safety from violence. I wish I could tell you that it is enough

for God that God will give these abandoned, oppressed, and suffering ones their reward in heaven. That would get us off the hook I know, but the Bible makes it abundantly clear that God will have more. The first will be the last and the last first. The poor will inherit the earth. I shudder to think where that leaves us. Perhaps we should consider sharing what we have before they come and take it. That seems to make more sense than continuing on in the vain belief that God's justice has no teeth after all, or that God is really too nice to do all those nasty things the prophets predicted. I am terribly sorry, but I'm not sure I would bet my life on that.

The third thing I would like to apologize for is that being a Christian is not always nice or easy. I'm sorry but I am not sure that coming to church every other Sunday, putting five bucks in your envelope, and taking your turn at leading the coffee hour is sufficient for the working out of your salvation. Oh I know. We've all been saved by grace through faith. I'm not doubting blessed Paul. I'm just wondering if it might not take a bit of effort on our own part as well. How we ever got to gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is a bit of a mystery to me. Dying in the mid-day sun after you have been nailed to a cross and had a spear stabbed in your side does not sound like the way to begin a nice, easy, tidy faith.

I'm sorry, but I strongly suspect God expects each of us to make some sacrifices, take some risks, and put ourselves on the line once in a while. There will probably come a time in your life when you will have to walk up to the edge of life and take a step off the edge into the unknown. Some day you may need to undertake an act of incredible heroism. You may have the opportunity to sacrifice a thing that is very dear to you for the good of someone else. You may be called to journey to the depths of your own fears and compulsions so that you can be healed and show others the way. One way or the other it is unlikely that you will be able to be a Christian for long without getting a little dirt on your hands or without being challenged.

For example, take Mary. She was a nice religious girl about the age of our two altar-girls this morning. Tina and Riley, if someone appeared to you this morning and asked you to have a baby for them and to hurry up and answer because the fate of the whole human race hung in the balance, how would you

respond? Tina says, “No way!”, and Riley says, “I’d be too afraid!” They sound like two honest and realistic responses for fifteen-year old girls. If I were Gabriel, knowing that the whole future of God’s relationship with humankind hung on the answer of Mary, I believe I would have been sweating. God sure does take some risks.

Mary came through though. We all know her answer: “Be it unto me according to thy will.” Isn’t it just like us that we see her response as an act of humble submission, rather than an assertive and courageous act of faithfulness. Perhaps it’s hard for us to imagine ourselves being ready to take such a risk, much less a teenage girl. Maybe that’s why we need to tell this story of Mary and the Annunciation every Advent, to remind ourselves that our faith needs no apology. It demands courage, trust, honesty, a commitment to justice, the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices in the name of the highest love, and a comfort with being surprised by mystery on an irregular basis. Why should we act apologetic! Not even the soap operas give you all that, and I assure you they never apologize. Amen.