

“HOW GABRIEL GOT THE JOB”

(A Christmas Tale for All Ages)

Luke 1:26-33 (p. 991)

Christmas has always been an enchanting time for me because of its traditions. I enjoy singing the same old carols that never seem to lose their charm. In fact, it's probably because they **are** so familiar that they wear so well. It's like the Nativity story. We all know that Christmas just wouldn't be complete without reading again that old story that never wears out. Candlelight services on Christmas Eve, listening to Handel's "Messiah," giving gifts, families together again – all these traditions, and so many others, are what make this season so timelessly charming.

Let me tell you about one tradition that has blessed a great many people, including myself. It began many years ago in New York City at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Each Christmastide their Pastor, David H. C. Read, would reserve one Sunday to tell his flock a story he had written for them and set to rhyme. "*Christmas Tales for All Ages*" he called them. And for many years my mother would send me copies of these stories. I learned to cherish Dr. Read's stories because they had a way, each year, of making the celebration of our Lord's birth a little sweeter.

Today I'd like to share with you one of my favorites. It's called, "*How Gabriel Got the Job.*" Some of you may recall it. But whether it's familiar or new to you, I think you'll find it as thought provoking as it is charming. He writes:

If I were to ask you who are the people who are named in the Christmas story, I expect all of you would be able to say: Jesus, Mary, Joseph. Then some would think back a little and add: Zechariah, Elizabeth, and their son John. And the smart ones would be able to complete the list with Simeon and Anna, the old people who welcomed the baby Jesus. So that's everybody? No; there's a name left out. "*In the sixth month the angel **Gabriel** was sent from God.*"

So this Christmas, as I was looking for a story to tell you and thinking of the people we read about in Matthew and Luke, I heard a soft voice – the kind that comes when we are very, very quiet – saying: "*Hi! What about **me**? Read that verse again, only this time read it as you would expect to find it.*" So I thought a little and then read: "*In the sixth month an angel was sent from God...*"

"*Exactly!*" said Gabriel. "*That's what they always say in the Bible: **An** angel – old So-and-so or What's-his-name – as if one angel was the same as another. Why do you mortals think of us as being identical and interchangeable like the hairs of your head or as a kind of endless line of heavenly Rockettes? (Yet the Lord tells us that even the hairs of your head are numbered – and every Rockette has a name.) It's about time you really saw my name in there. 'The Angel **Gabriel** was sent by God.'* That's **me** - not Raphael, or Michael, or Uriel, or Melkeil, or Helemmelek, or Melejal..."

"All right," I said. "*I knew there were different **kinds** of angels – cherubim, seraphim, archangels, thrones, dominions, powers...*"

"*Those don't matter,*" said Gabriel, "*and I'll bet you got most of them from Milton rather than the Bible. I happen to be an archangel, but angel is good enough for me. I'm not a celestial snob. What matters is that we're **all** different, and I'm a bit more different than the others because I got my name into the New Testament. How about that?"*

I really hadn't thought about it before, so I asked him how it happened that his name is there. "*If you've got about ten minutes,*" he said, "*I'll tell you.*" So I shut my eyes and listened. And this is what I heard.

It was one day in heaven a long time ago,

We angels were flitting, some to and some fro.
 The to-ones were speeding from God to the stars,
 and planets like Jupiter, Venus and Mars,
 Or the earth where they visited people like Gideon
 And gave him the backbone to smite hosts of Midian.
 The fro-ones were swooping right back to the throne
 Where the Lord God Almighty was reigning alone,
 Surrounded by music and dancing and lights,
 With seraphim making spectacular flights
 And cherubim laughing and saints having fun,
 Like the family of God when the world was begun;
 And they shouted for joy as it says in the story
 Of Job: it was glory and glory and glory.

It was then that it happened: a rumor went round
 (and a rumor of angels makes a curious sound).
 It was said the Almighty was going to choose
 A messenger-angel to send to the Jews.
 (The Jews were a people he often addressed,
 For through them the people of earth would be blessed).
 And this was the job that the angels liked best.
 It was better than touring the stars in their capers,
 Or visiting planets with nothing but vapors,
 Or spinning through space for ten million years,
 So the Lord God of hosts never lacked volunteers.
 When he needed an angel to visit Judaea,
 The angels all thought it a splendid idea.

An uproar of angels broke out in the sky
 As everyone wanted to know **how** and **why**.
 There were questions and gossip an all kinds of *guessage*
 As to who would be chosen and what be the message;
 Till a mighty archangel blew a blast on his trump
 That made the most garrulous cherubim jump
 (and they, as you know, are of angels most plump).

When silence descended the archangel spoke:
 “Be silent and listen, you heavenly folk.
 The Lord has been watching this planet called Earth

Where he brought a peculiar family to birth –
 Not beasts, like the elephant, dog, or giraffe,
 But able, like angels, to love and to laugh;
 Half-beast and half-angel, in fact, you might say.
 And, believe it or not, the Lord liked them that way.
 He gave them their freedom and wanted their love.
 He wanted them happy like angels above.
 He taught them the laws of the Kingdom of Heaven
 (of which there are only one less than eleven)
 And how to be happy and kindly and good,
 And never be jealous or grumpy or rude.
 But now when he looks at the earth he has made,
 The Lord is so sadly distressed and dismayed.
 These humans are squabbling and fighting and cursing
 And, instead of improving, they're steadily *worsing*.”

Gabriel paused as if he'd run out of rhymes, and then he told me how the Lord had decided to do something to set his human family straight, and how he wanted an angel to go to earth with a very special message. And the angel who came nearest to guessing just what he was going to do would be that messenger. So, said Gabriel, There was a great stirring among the angels, and one mighty figure pushed to the front with a great clatter, and said:

“I'm the archangel Michael, commander in chief
 of the powers of fire and destruction – in brief,
I'm the one the job calls for, and I hazard a guess
 It'll take me ten minutes to clean up the mess.
 I came to the rescue, remember, of Moses –
 And the Red Sea for Pharaoh was no bed of roses.

And according to someone who wrote 'Revelation,'
 I'm an expert in star-wars and grim ruination;
 For he tells how I'll fight with my old battle wagon,
 and extinguish the flames of a horrible dragon.
 (By the way, brother Gabriel, you'll find my name too

in the Bible; so I'm just as famous as you.)

Let us loose, dear Lord God, on these miserable sinners,
By lunchtime tomorrow we'll be back for our dinners.
There's only one way to straighten these humans –
It's to wipe them all out, and begin with some new ones.”

Again Gabriel paused, as if he'd run out of rhymes, and went on to tell me that God shook his head and said, “*No, Michael, that is **not** what I had in mind.*” Then, he proceeded, there was a buzz of excitement and a glorious, beautiful angel pushed his way through the crowd:

“Here I am to press my claim,
Raphael is my glorious name.
And in the heavenly line of duty
I specialize in things of beauty.
I'm sure that what you have in mind
is bringing beauty to mankind.
If they could only clearly see
how lovely everything would be.
If men and women, girls and boys
discovered the fantastic joys
of art and poetry and song,
they'd soon get rid of all that's wrong.
For all of them would then agree
to practice filial harmony,
to settle down and live in peace;
and all their strife and wars would cease.”

But God just sighed and shook his head
and slowly in his wisdom said:
“I wish it could be as you say,
but beauty will not save them – nay,
they've had their art and beauty, but
not all the treasures of King Tut,
nor all the theories you're spinning

will keep them from their love of sinning.
 Thanks, Raphael, for all you do,
 but this is not the job for you.”

So, said Gabriel, Raphael didn't get the job. But there was another angel fluttering near the throne, and he spoke with the deep voice of an old teacher who expected to be listened to. He began his speech with a line I'd heard before, as scholars often do:

“O God our help in ages past, I'm Uriel the sage.
 Of all the angels that thou hast, it's me thou must engage.
 For all these mortals down below regrettably are fools,
 And all they need, as well I know, are schools and still more schools.
 O give them school and college, Lord, to keep them from their folly,
 And they will stop being untoward and prickly as holly.
 Philosophy will clear their minds, and Ethics keep them pure,
 While Science will put in their hands the tools their ills to cure.
 Psychology will banish fear and bring them sweet accord;
 While Sociology brings near Thy blessed kingdom, Lord.
 The more they know, these mortals dim, the happier they will be.
 So send **me** with the news of Him, The Teacher – just like me.”

But God said sadly: *“Uriel, I do have a Teacher in mind, but not just a teacher. For you've forgotten something. It is good to have knowledge, but all knowledge doesn't lead to good. You're a clever angel, Uriel, but there are devils cleverer than you. And they are very busy where that human family lives.”*

And that, said Gabriel, was where I had an inspiration. It dawned on me that the most wonderful thing in heaven was not the power and the glory, not the beauty and the joy, not the wisdom and the knowledge, but something else – something that streamed from the heart of God himself, something that bound us together, something that was inexhaustible and new every morning. It was **love**. And I had seen it, too, on my visits to earth – a mother giving love to her child, a man giving love to his neighbor, a community giving love to the needy, a

people giving love to their God. So I said, *“I don't know what your plan is, Lord, but I'm sure it has something to do with love.”*

The Lord smiled a smile that lit up the vaults of heaven as he said:

“Gabriel, you've won the right
to be my messenger tonight.
Speed off unto a little town
called Nazareth; and when you're down,
look for a house where lives a maid,
lovely and good and unafraid,
engaged to Joseph, a faithful man.
Enter as quietly as you can,
for in a little room upstairs
you'll find her saying evening prayers.

To her alone you'll give my news,
for this, you see, is how I choose
to bring my love to humankind
and help them, all, the way to find
to health and happiness and peace,
and from their sins to get release.
It's not with brains or brawn or beauty
that I'll return them to their duty.
But with a gift of love that's more
than ever was beheld before.

I'm going to give **myself** to them
in a child to be born in Bethlehem.
My Son, my Son, my image true
and I will see what they will do
with him, delivered in the straw
to be their Savior; for I saw
that only love would win them back,
and none can counter love's attack.
So for the years to come I leave,
for all who gladly will receive

my Jesus, grace and peace and joy.
Tell Mary that her little boy
will be, through all their mortal strife,
for them the Way, the Truth, the Life.”

“So I was the one who got the job,” said Gabriel, as his voice gradually faded from my mind. “And even **I** didn’t know what a wonderful message I was giving to Mary. Do **you** – even yet?”

αμεν