

Cast of Characters:
WINGS OR NOT: GABRIEL MAKES THE CONNECTION
Luke 1:26-37 Auburn First UMC - Auburn, Indiana
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The Repair Shop

The Repair Shop is a delightful little British-made tv series on the Netflix streaming service. (I don't know what a streaming service is, and how that is different than one more cable channel, but I thought if I used the phrase "streaming service" you would think I am culturally "savy.")

I discovered *The Repair Shop* a month or two ago. It's filmed out in the English countryside where, in several thatched buildings, a collection of expert craftsmen and craftswomen have been gathered together to repair things. People from around the United Kingdom bring their broken or worn-out heirlooms and antiques to *The Repair Shop*. One of the experts goes to work fixing and restoring what seemed hopeless and beyond repair.

There is an expert carpenter, an expert blacksmith, an expert upholsterer, an expert horologist, as well as others. An object is brought in, and the appropriate expert is called over. They look the object over, think outloud about what is needed to restore the faded, broken, worn-out, shattered thing back to its original beauty, and then go to work.

It's really almost impossible to believe what they are able to do with what seems beyond repair. In a recent episode someone brought in a detailed Hungarian vase that was in pieces, and I couldn't imagine it ever being made right. Another person brought in a worn out music box built to resemble a large Swiss chalet, and still another brought in an old chair that looked like it needed to be straight to the nearest landfill.

I've only watched a few episodes. One part of the viewing experience has surprised me and you'll never guess what it is: tears. When the restored piece has been put back together, when the broken pieces have been glued back in place, and the vase has been carefully painted so you would never guess it was ever broken, it is covered up with a light, small towel. The person to whom the piece belongs comes into *The Repair Shop*, stands there waiting, and then the restored object is revealed.

That moment has this way of making me cry. It's a manly kind of restrained shedding of tears, of course, but I see these people overwhelmed with gladness that something they loved has been restored. I can't figure out why I have to fight back the tears at the end of each repair or restoration project. It just seems silly to get so emotional about a tv show where things are fixed.

My reaction, I've come to realize, isn't about the show and things being "fixed." The tears are generated out of my own awareness that something is badly broken here...on the earth...in this time...among us...within us. Something has gone wrong. And it doesn't seem easily fixed.

How Did Things Get so Badly Broken?

One of the deep, hard questions members of the human race ask is, "How did things get so broken? How did we get so broken?"

The Bible doesn't hide the fact that things get broken, things go wrong, very soon after creation. Genesis 2, one of the Hebrew stories of creation, tells us how God says to the first humans, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die." (:16-17)

They have everything that need. God has seen to that. But right from the beginning we see the human tendency to think that what we have -even if it is perfect- isn't enough. We always want more. There is this hunger in us, like some hungry wild animal hiding in the bushes, for more.

And we also see the human tendency to put ourselves in the place of God. God has a way of doing things but what does God know? God made the cosmos, God hung the stars in the sky, God invented music and quantum physics and poetry and hydrogen and gravity, God tuned the ocean and the coasts to make that particular kind of music we hear when we walk a beach or stand on a cliff overlooking the sea, but we convince ourselves that we know better than God about...well, almost everything.

So the first two humans do their best to take the place of God. They will do what they want to do, no matter what God has said, and they break things.

When God comes to them in the cool of the evening, Genesis says, the man and the woman run from God. They are only too aware of their nakedness, their imperfections, their vulnerability, and so they run and hide from God. When God finds them, God can tell that something has changed in their relationship to their Creator. It's like that moment when you're on the phone with a friend, with someone you love, and you can tell that everything is somehow different. The first man and the first woman run from God, and then when they are questioned about which fruit they have tasted, they turn on one another. The man blames the woman and the woman blames the snake and, in a way, both the man and the woman blame God for things going wrong.

Something is broken. Something has gone wrong around us, in the world, within us. So when people bring their broken, faded, inoperative treasures to *The Repair Shop*, and these things are made new again, I find myself crying for a world that is broken and needs to be made right again. I think that is what the tears are about. I wish there was a place where we could all go and get put back together, again. I wish there was an experienced artisan who could fix what is broken between us and within us.

How Did We Get Here?

How did we get here? How did we get to this hateful place? How did we get to this fearful, angry place?

How did we get to this place where so many have so much and yet there are those who cannot sleep because of the threat of eviction?

How did we get to this place where more and more people either line up by the thousands at food pantries, or go to grocery stores and shoplift what they can to keep their children alive?

How did we get to this place where people must decide whether to eat or take their medication?

How did we get to this place where preachers of the Jesus message threaten violence against the political opposition?

How did we get to the place where Nazi banners were seen on our streets? How did we get to the place where some turned their back on the American dream that all people are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain, inalienable rights, shouting that only those with white skin matter to the nation and to God?

How did we get to this place where so many shrug at the medical care workers who are exhausted beyond words, refusing to do the simple things that could save the lives of their neighbors...and keep ICU's from being overwhelmed?

How did we get to this place where fear is embraced and hope is held at arm's length?

How did we get to this place where the trust we have for one another has drained away like water disappearing into sandy soil?

I don't know exactly how we got here, but I just know that something is broken. Not everything is broken. Some things are beautiful and right and whole, but there is too much...that is broken...around us and within us.

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Two Surprising, Mysterious Stories

The Gospel of Luke, which tells the story of Jesus, begins with two surprising, mysterious stories. The first story is about a couple named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. They are righteous, Luke says. They have played life by the rules. They are good people who can be counted on to do the right thing for the right reasons.

And yet life has not gone for them exactly as they had hoped. People in churches, mosques and synagogues sometimes forget this: they think that if you are faithful and play by the rules, then you're going life is going to work out just like you pray it will

work out. But Elizabeth and Zechariah are, despite loving God and playing by the rules, unable to get pregnant. This can often be a very hard thing for people, a painful burden, but in first century Palestine the inability to get pregnant was seen by many as a sign of God's rejection. Some people assumed if you couldn't get pregnant, you were damaged goods in the eyes of God.

Still, despite all of this, Zechariah and Elizabeth continue to pray. Zechariah, in fact, is part of a priestly family and so he periodically goes to the great Temple in Jerusalem to serve there. One day, as he is praying, an angel by the name of Gabriel shows up and says that Elizabeth -who is well past the age for AARP membership- is going to become pregnant. "He is going to be filled with the Holy Spirit," Gabriel tells Zechariah, and "he will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God."

Zechariah is shocked. He asks how this can be. Gabriel tells the old priest that he -the angel- has been sent to deliver good news. And since Zechariah hasn't believed the angel, the priest is going to be mute -unable to speak- until "the day these things appear." When Zechariah leaves the Temple, he is unable to say a word.

Elizabeth, when she finds out that she is pregnant, remains in seclusion for five months. If that doesn't make sense to you, a friend of our's in New Haven found out she was pregnant with an unexpected pregnancy later in life and she was so embarrassed that it was hard for her to go out in public. She thought people would laugh at her.

The second mysterious, surprising story at the start of the Gospel of Luke tells us about the same angel -Gabriel- showing up in the rural hill country of Galilee. In the story of the coming of John the Baptist, the angel comes after Zechariah and Elizabeth have been praying for years. In the story of young Mary, who lives in a small cross-roads town up in the hills, a place called Nazareth, the angel shows up without any warning. We don't have any indication that young Mary had been praying for, waiting for, an angel to come crashing into her life and changing the script but that is just what happens.

Mary is told that she has been favored by God, and that the Lord is with her. She is perplexed but the angel goes on to tell her not to be afraid. She is going to conceive and have a son, the angel says, and her boy is to be named Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. Of his kingdom, there will be no end, Gabriel says.

Gabriel tells Mary, when she asks how this can happen, that she will be overshadowed by "the power of the Most High" and the child will be called "Son of God."

Mary is uncertain about all of this, and then the angel points out that her older relative, Elizabeth, is also pregnant. "For nothing will be impossible with God," Gabriel says. Despite all her questions, Mary says, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

God has a way of doing what we don't expect. God does what we could not imagine happening. God does what we think is impossible.

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Every Time I Talk of Angels

Every time I talk about angels, I think several things. First, I realize how little I know about angels. I do not have an advanced degree in all things angelic. If you're going to ask me what angels eat and drink, I can't tell you. If you're going to ask about how angels are scheduled, I can't tell you. I can't tell you why Gabriel was scheduled to speak both to Zechariah and then, later, to young Mary. I don't know if angels, like Buckeye football players, get a little set of angel symbols on their helmets each time they made a great play and Gabriel had made more than his share...of great plays. So I always realize how little I know about angels.

Second, I know as soon as we talk about angels some people lean back and smile at such talk. They think angel talk is silly. Children of the enlightenment, they are convinced that talk of angels is a product of a superstitious mindset better suited to the Middle Ages than to this enlightened age (*which, I might add, can't seem to think straight*).

One reason people think angel talk is silly is that Hollywood seems to have no clue about angels. Their attempts to portray angels are often just silly. They either have these goofy white wings, attached to odd little men or silly women, or Hollywood shows us John Travolta as an angel. He has wings attached to a buff body that has obviously spent a lot of time in the gym. Travolta, as an angel, looked like he could play middle linebacker for the New Orleans Saints. He's a tough guy in a long, black coat.

So I know some people lean back and smile when we talk about angels. Which I think is an interesting reaction. Some of the most close-minded people I know profess to be open-minded until it comes to things like prayer and angels. I remind open-minded children of the enlightenment that there are things we don't see and things we don't understand that are still real...and true.

The third thing I always think about, when we talk about angels, is that they are messengers who help God make a connection with us. And angels almost always look and sound like ordinary people.

Someone we don't know, or someone we know, ordinary looking or not, says something or does something and that moment changes us...changes everything for us. The eternal God has a way of using messengers to speak to us, to nudge us, to remind us who God is and who we were created to be. The eternal God has this way of using the auto mechanic at the local service station, or the person behind us in line at the grocery store, or the hiker sitting by a stream in a state park, to say something to us we need to hear...to open our eyes to something true and deep we have been missing.

I don't know much about angels but I know that there are these moments...with ordinary people...who tell us something extraordinary or do something extraordinary. They may show us something we would have missed otherwise.

God makes a connection with Mary through Gabriel. God speaks to her fears, and invites her into a holy adventure that changes the world.

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Stories

I could tell you stories.

You could tell me stories.

I think of the angels who have come my way, and I see all these faces...and hear these voices.

There was a teenage girl in a long-term care facility for children in Durham, North Carolina. She was barely able to move out of her bed, but she could speak and she could think and she knew a lot about God. The first time I met her, I was a young associate pastor leading a group of middle school youth on a visit to the children's hospital. When we entered the ward, the youth in our group -most of them- were frozen with fear. They didn't know what to say or do with these children who were facing such challenges.

So I led the way. And, somehow, I said "hello" to this one, particular thirteen or fourteen year old. We introduced ourselves to one another and we began to talk. She was the daughter of a fire fighter in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I remember she had a sense of humor, and she knew things about faith I did not know yet. She had a faith, a trust, that was like Everest or Denali while my faith was a modest rise on a Midwestern prairie. After that visit, I went back four or five times on my own. Every time we talked, I knew I was on holy ground. I think she taught me more about faith and God than I learned in systematic theology or Wesleyan studies. She was bold and honest and funny, and she pushed me. She could have said, "Don't be afraid." I don't know. I don't want to put words in her mouth, but she could have said "Don't be afraid" because fear has a way of getting to me now and then.

I remember Frank, the tobacco farmer, who showed me what it is like to rejoice in all things, learning to be content with a lot or nothing, and whose faith was even bigger than he was. I remember his red face, his quiet smile, his black Bible, his soft voice, and how his hand would swallow up my small hand when we would shake. He told me that my arrival at that small church may have saved it, but the truth is that I needed Mr Huey more than he needed me.

I think of Hazel who, across a plain, white kitchen table, in a small, simple house, taught me the meaning of grace in a way I have never forgotten. She taught me a lesson, and at her kitchen table I received so much grace that it left me shaking my head in wonder. Leaving that farm house, I drove back down that dirt road and headed home.

Angels have this way of helping us head home, don't they?

I think of a flight from Chicago to Denver one afternoon. I found myself sitting in that small DC-9 next to a business consultant from New York City. She worked for a national firm and she was going out to Rapid City, South Dakota to hold some workshops for a firm there.

When we sat down together, as the plane filled up, I asked her a question or two and a lifetime of anger and hurt and betrayals poured out of her. I listened. I listened all the way from O'Hare to Rapid City. I listened and then, as the plane landed and slowed to a stop on the ground in South Dakota, she began to swear again and asked no one in particular why God would send her to such a forlorn, God-forsake place. She was asking God where God was and why God was doing this to her. I said something. I hope it was the right something. As she retrieved her things from the overhead bin, I remember offering her some kind of a blessing. I wonder if she remembers the young man on that flight? I wonder if the listening...or the words he offered...made a difference and helped her make a connection with the God who can fix broken things?

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Gabriel Points Us to the One Who Makes the Wounded Whole

Here is what Gabriel tells young Mary: God is at work to fix broken things. God is at work to make things right. God is at work to show the world a better way in her child. His name will be Jesus, he will be the Son of God, and he will save his people from their sins.

Gabriel tells us about a God who is at work to fix broken things and make the wounded whole...in this Child. In this Carpenter. In this man. In his way of love. It's what fixes broken things and makes the wounded whole.

At the end of many of the episodes of *The Repair Shop*, I work to hold back tears that something so broken, so faded, so far gone, could be made so right. The tears are a puzzle. Maybe I yearn for a way that this broken world, and the brokenness in us, might be fixed...repaired...made whole again.

How did we get here? I don't know really, but Gabriel says the One who can make us whole is on the way. The One who can put the world back together, Gabriel says, is the One who is on the way. Gabriel points the way to Jesus and says, "He's the One."