

# *The Divine Interloper*

Luke 1:26-38

## **Text:**

*Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you.* Luke 1:28

## **Introduction**

Ulrich von Gradwitz and Georg Znaeym were chronic contenders. Actually, more than that! They were passionate enemies, possessed by a broad and deep enmity that perpetually seethed and never subsided. Their fathers before them and their fathers' fathers as well carried the same bitter hatred. For three generations these two families engaged in a perseverating ill-will against each other. The perennial bone of contention was the narrow strip of steep woodland that lay between their two respective properties.

One intensely sinister winter night, it so happened that Ulrich von Gradwitz and Georg Znaeym were out hunting in the darkness, each with his own group of men. Each of them knew that the prize trophy he would like to hunt down and kill would be human game. Both Ulrich and Georg strayed away from their individual hunting parties and, as fate would have it, suddenly came face to face with each other on a portion of that coveted narrow stretch of woodland. *The two enemies stood glaring at one another for a long silent moment. Each had a rifle in his hand, each had hate in his heart and murder uppermost in his mind. The chance had come to give full play to the passions of a lifetime.*

Before either could pull the trigger, however, *a deed of Nature's own violence overwhelmed them both. A fierce shriek of the storm had been answered by a splitting crash over their heads, and ere (before) they could leap aside a mass of falling beech tree had thundered down on them,* pinning each of them securely beneath its colossal weight. Both men were hopelessly immobile. At first Ulrich and Georg were relieved at still being alive and began to rail at each other, each one insisting that his men would be the first to appear on the scene and would make short work of the other. Yet, when no one answered their shouts for aid, and as their physical pain intensified and their lifeblood gushed from their wounds, each began to mellow and to warm up to his arch enemy caught in the same inescapable dilemma.

In an act of new-found compassion, with his one free hand, Ulrich von Gradwitz passed his flask of wine to Georg Znaeym for a draught of soothing comfort. *What a Heaven-sent draught it seemed.* From then on, together, they lifted their voices for help, each insisting that when his men arrived, he would order them to release his former enemy first. At last their shouts were heard, and the two men saw shadows of figures coming through the woods.

*"Are they your men?" asked Georg. "Are they your men?" he repeated.*

*"No," said Ulrich with a laugh, the idiotic chattering laugh of a man unstrung with hideous fear.*

*"Who are they?" asked Georg quickly, straining his eyes to see what the other would gladly not have seen.*

*"Wolves," cried Ulrich.<sup>i</sup> It was a pack of wolves.*

## **An Act of God**

What H.H. Munro calls in this short story *a deed of Nature* others might identify as *an act of God*. You and I know—as God knows—that at times it takes an act of God to disband deep-seated enmity, to harness horrific hatred, to restore rusted and rancid relationships.

You and I know as well that it takes an act of God to cope with major disruptions and to *find new life through unwanted change.*<sup>ii</sup> Mary's life was probably just the way she liked it. She was young, virgin, presumably beautiful, born of a respectable family. She was engaged to be married to a distinguished man named Joseph, whose lineage cascaded down from the esteemed house of King David. Filled with all the warm expectations that any young bride-to-be would savor, Mary's life was marked undoubtedly by a high measure of tranquility. Keeping her vessel of life on an even keel was something greatly to be desired. No need for a change of direction in her plans or for an ill wind in her sails! She was planning to be married; she was planning to be faithful to a carpenter named

Joseph; she was planning to keep his house, to bear his children, and to grow old along with him. Any significant change to this plan would be unwelcome. Any disruption to her tranquility would be undesirable.

But then, as we have established, it takes an act of God to *find new life through unwanted change*. “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you,” declares an angel named Gabriel. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” This might have been awfully good news if Mary had been married, or if the son to be conceived in her womb were the son of Joseph. But no! This is an act of God. It shall be God’s Son. How extraordinary! At a time when Mary most values homeostasis—a state of security, stability, predictability, certainty, and tranquility—God intrudes.

### **Intruder in the Dust**

The defining metaphor for Advent is that God is the Divine Interloper, the Intruder in the Dust.<sup>iii</sup> The eternal God invades the finite earth, where the rhythm of life begins with our coming from dust and ends with our returning to dust. Into this huge dustbin of the world God bursts into the darkness, intrudes in the dust, and sets before us visions of a larger reality, images of eternal life, so that the first stanza of our life song may be *earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust*, but the final stanza and victorious refrain, to be sure, is: *in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life*.<sup>iv</sup> And to that end, Mary is going to have a baby by whom this promise will be fulfilled. But what an extraordinary intrusion!

The unique characteristic of God’s intrusion is always this: *the Lord is with you*. And whenever God intrudes in your life, that is, whenever there is an act of God in your life—whether it appears to be positive or negative—this is also true: *you have found favor with God*.

You and I know—and God knows—that at times it takes an act of God to dissolve our despair, to dissipate our doubts, to quell our fears, to sustain us through *the dark night of the soul*,<sup>v</sup> to purge our pasts, to ride with us the tidal vicissitudes of fortune and misfortune, to sustain us when we exercise the leap of faith into the darkness, to convince us to live with hope in a challenging age. You and I know it takes an act of God to live beyond our *feast of losses*,<sup>vi</sup> to lean into the subsequent loneliness and open our arms to a divine, intangible comfort. The angel’s words strike a clarion note here: *Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you*.

### **Conclusion**

What we are anticipating during this Advent is an act of God that has already happened: the birth of the Savior, Emmanuel—God with us. Now, it is strictly a matter of paying attention. *Hail, O favored one. Greetings, O favored one. Listen, O favored one*. God has intruded into history. God has intervened in the world. God has invaded our dust, our enmities, our homeostasis, our despair, our doubts and fears, our past sins and present hopes, our isolation and losses, our dreams and aspirations. So the angel’s admonition to us is simply this: Look to Bethlehem. Pay attention to what has already happened: *the Lord is with you*.

With a certainty such as this, I suspect we could live the rest of our dusty days with the hope, joy, and conviction of a heavenly choir. *Hail, O favored ones, the Lord is with you*.

The Rev. Calvin Coolidge Wilson  
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### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> Saki (H.H. Munro), *The Interlopers*, the words in italics are direct quotations from his short story.

<sup>ii</sup> See M. Craig Barnes’ book titled *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life through Unwanted Change*.

<sup>iii</sup> Title of William Faulkner’s novel in which a black man in the south, who is accused of killing a white man, is proven not guilty after three people dig up the corpse of the victim and discover evidence that validates the innocence of the accused. The significance of the title is undoubtedly

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related to the act of intrusion into the grave where “to dust we return.”

<sup>iv</sup> *Book of Common Prayer, Burial of the Dead*, p. 333

<sup>v</sup> St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), *The Dark Night of the Soul* is the title of his treatise (1583)  
based on his poem *Songs of the Soul* . . .

<sup>vi</sup> Stanley Kunitz, *The Layers*, from his book of poems titled *Passing Through*