

“The Vision of Sir Launfal”
December 12, 2021
Luke 1:26-38
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, **27**to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. **28**And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” **29**But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. **30**The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31**And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32**He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. **33**He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” **34**Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” **35**The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. **36**And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. **37**For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38**Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

How does God speak to us? How does he get his message across to us? As good Reformed Christians, we're supposed to say, “in the Scriptures, in God's Word.” But those scriptures are full of stories of other ways God speaks—like this angelic visitation to Mary, or often it is in dreams and visions. In Christian tradition, those dreams and visions do not end, but often through history are many accounts of how God has spoken to someone in a dream or vision. And for centuries, those dreams and visions became the basis of a journey or a quest, from a simple pilgrimage to the crusades.

But many of these quests, especially in the English tradition focus on the Holy Grail, from the Middle Ages and King Arthur all the way up until Indiana Jones and Dan Brown and the DaVinci Code. The Holy Grail, of course the legendary cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper on the night of his betrayal and arrest. But there is one story about the Grail that is really a Christmas story and so I thought it would be appropriate for today, especially since we have talked significantly this year about how God can use our church, our property next door, and each of one of us in his service. Our Shared Blessings group is wrestling with this very topic, how is God calling us to be of service.

Sir Launfal methodically went over his list for the third time. If he were to leave tomorrow on his great adventure, everything would have to be ready. He tested his sword carefully. It was sharp to the touch,

and it gleamed when he held it up to the moonlight. Sir Launfal would use that sword with great courage against anyone who stood in his way.

Next, he checked his shield. The metal was polished, and the leather strap new and strong. He glanced toward the barn where his horse anticipated the journey. Sir Launfal had fed and curried him just moments ago.

Finally he knelt beside his bed to pray before he slept. "Dear Christ," he began, "tomorrow I begin my great journey in your name. I ask for your blessing and guidance as I search for the Holy Grail, the cup you used the last night you ate with your disciples. Make me pure, for only if I am pure will I be worthy to be the one who will find your holy cup."

When Sir Launfal fell asleep, he soon began to dream. His dream was so real that he actually thought it was morning and he was saying goodbye to all in the castle. Proudly he rode through the gates on his beautiful horse.

Just on the other side of the gates, however, a beggar stopped him. How annoying! At this high moment, at the start of his quest for the Holy Grail, he certainly could not be bothered with someone as unimportant as a beggar. Disdainfully, Sir Launfal flung a penny in his direction and rode on.

Time can pass very quickly in a dream. Sir Launfal's dream covered many years. He searched everywhere for the Holy Grail. He fought many battles, but never did Christ even give him a glimpse of the cup he had used at the Last Supper before his suffering and death.

Sir Launfal was discouraged. He had become an old man, and in his dream he finally decided to return home. Sadly, he rode along the snow-covered road. As he came within sight of the castle, he saw all the lights ablaze and he realized it was Christmas Eve. There would be much feasting and joy within the castle walls.

Sir Launfal rode up to the guard at the gate. To his dismay the guard did not recognize him. "No beggars allowed within the castle gates," he insisted and drove Sir Launfal away.

Sir Launfal was dejected. He got stiffly off his horse and sat down in the shelter of the castle

wall. He looked at the light streaming out of the windows. It was Christmas Eve, the night the Christ child was born, and he was excluded from his own home. Had Christ rejected him altogether?

Finally the noble knight pulled his last crust of bread from his pocket. Just as he began to eat it, he noticed a beggar nearby. It was the same beggar he had seen at the gate many years ago as he was leaving on his mission. Sir Launfal broke his bread and gave half to the beggar. Then he went to the brook, broke the ice, and drew water for both of them to drink. As they ate together, and drank from the old knight's wooden bowl, a strange thing happened: Sir Launfal suddenly thought the crust tasted like fresh bread and the water like the finest wine! He turned to the beggar, but the beggar was gone. In his place he saw the shining presence of Christ. Then he heard Christ saying:

*Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three--
Himself, his hungry neighbor, and me.*

Sir Launfal looked down at his wooden bowl. It was no longer there. Instead, he held in his hand the Holy Grail. His search was over. With that the knight awoke from his sleep. It was morning. Sir Launfal believed Christ had spoken to him, and he knew what he must do.

“Put away my sword and armor,” he instructed the servants. “I am not going to distant countries to look for the Holy Grail. It is right here in my own castle.”

From that day on, Sir Launfal opened wide the gates of his castle to the poor and hungry. He welcomed both rich and poor alike and was friendly to all. In his castle all experienced the love and kindness of one who had supped with Christ.¹ May it be so here as well.

1 White, William R. *Stories for the Gathering: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*. p. 20-22.