

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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December 2023

Gabriel

January 7, 2021. It was too late, really, to be singing Christmas hymns. Two weeks had passed since that high holy day. A new year had dawned; winter semester was underway. But in the stillness of that delivery room in the Orem Community Hospital—with Lia resting exhaustedly in bed and our new baby boy sleeping peacefully in my arms—I figured I could sing what I pleased.

Some of the sweetest moments in my life have come when I've held our newborn babies close during the first hours of their lives and sung to them while Lia slept. I sing favorite hymns and primary songs and try in a modest way to introduce our infants to Italian and German opera—to “Va pensiero” from Verdi’s *Nabucco* or “In diesen heil’gen Hallen” from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. On this occasion, after exhausting my usual repertoire, I turned to the carols of Christmas.

The sweetness and peace in that hospital room contrasted sharply with the anxiety and tumult of the previous two weeks. Just before Christmas, our whole family, Lia included, contracted Covid. Her doctors worried about possible blood clotting, and in the days prior to the baby’s birth, I had to give her blood-thinning shots twice each day. We prayed fervently and often that she and the baby would be protected and that the delivery would go well.

The day before the scheduled induction I worked from home, wanting to be on hand should Lia go into labor naturally. I taught the first section of my “Structures of the Constitution” course via Zoom. I shared what the revelations declare about constitutional principles and tried to

convey why I thought the contents of our course were so critical for freedom and democracy.

As soon as the class ended, I learned that, even as I taught, rioters were storming our nation’s capital and seeking violently to prevent the certification of a presidential election. As a constitutionalist and a patriot, I was offended and wounded to my deep heart’s core.

And in despair I bowed my head:

“There is no peace on earth,” I said,

“For hate is strong and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good will to men.”¹

Our baby’s delivery went miraculously well. During six previous deliveries, I had mostly played the part of the ineptly officious husband—eager and well-intended but mostly bungling and ineffectual. This time I felt clear spiritual promptings at each step directing how I could best help Lia and our baby. It was the smoothest delivery of our seven. Our little boy emerged, healthy and perfect, and Lia shone radiant and beautiful, weary yet wonderfully strong.

There remained the question of a name. We knew it needed to be special. This, after all, was a seventh child born on the seventh day of a year that was the product of seven times three. All my Dante-inflected Medieval numerology was humming at full throttle. We wanted, moreover, to give him an angel name to match that of his only brother, Abdiel, whom we had named for the seraph in *Paradise Lost* who strikes the first blow against the rebels in Milton’s war in heaven.

*So spake the Seraph Abdiel, faithful found
Among the faithless, faithful only hee[.]²*

We finally settled on *Gabriel* after I called Lia's (then single) brother of that name to ensure that he didn't want to reserve the name for a son of his own. He assured us that he had no intention of naming any of his children after himself.³ The name seemed suited for the season and the time: Gabriel, the messenger of hope; Gabriel, the harbinger of peace.

*To Mary, fearless, strong, and mild,
You once announced the Holy Child,
On Whom our charge of sin was piled,
Though He was harmless, undefiled.
O tell His wonders, Gabriel!⁴*

As I sang Christmas hymns to Baby Gabriel, I pondered the stark difference between the setting of his birth and that of the Savior whom Gabriel's namesake foretold. There was nothing in Bethlehem that remotely resembled this climate-controlled room equipped with technical marvels. There were no nurses or attending physicians checking in periodically and on whom Joseph and Mary could call for help at a moment's notice.

In the midst of these reflections, I heard myself singing familiar words from the incomparable Cristina Rossetti:

*Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.⁵*

Joseph, Mary, and their Baby, I realized, though they lacked our miraculous modern equipment, were attended and guarded by the angels of heaven.

Somehow in that moment I also knew that we had been similarly blessed by angelic assistants. With a flash of inspiration, I understood that our Father had answered our fervent prayers by sending angels to help with Gabriel's delivery.

*And now . . . has the day of miracles ceased?
Or have angels ceased to appear unto the children
of men? Or has he withheld the power of the Holy
Ghost from them? Or will he, so long as time shall
last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one
man upon the face thereof to be saved? Behold, I
say unto you, Nay (Moro. 7:35-37).*

The Greek term *Angelos* means "messenger." We at BYU are in the business of preparing messengers of peace and hope who will one day warm and illuminate our fractious, wounded world. A mighty prophet once prayed: "[L]et the morality of the graduates of this university provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet."⁶ May it ever be so.

*The God of tenderness and care,
His arm of power now makes bare,
And all the nations stop and stare
To see His banners flowing fair:
O hoist that standard, Gabriel!*

*Clear as the moon, fair as the sun,
His majesty hath rivals none,
An endless round His courses run,
But His high work is not yet done:
Advance that work, O Gabriel!*

*He comes again, our glorious King,
With wondrous healing in His wing,
Heaven and earth with praises ring,
Archangels and seraphs sing:
Direct their chorus, Gabriel!*

*O messenger of hope and joy,
Who once declared the blessed Boy,
Let all your hosts their songs employ,
Let nothing our high mirth alloy:
We wait your tidings, Gabriel!⁷*

¹ William Wadsworth Longfellow, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" (1863).

² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, lines 896-897.

³ His future wife had other ideas. Our Gabriel now has a cousin named Gabriel Royce Suttner, who goes by "Royce."

⁴ Justin Collings, "Gabriel" (2021, unpublished).

⁵ Cristina Rossetti, "In the Bleak Midwinter" (1872).

⁶ Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University" in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams* (Brigham Young University, 2022) 59.

⁷ Collings, "Gabriel."