

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

PRAYER: O God, never ready to heed our demands but ever ready to hear our pleas, prepare us for the scandal of your advent. Deliver us from the pride of the mighty. Let us not forget that the Son of the Most High was the child of the lowest. Remind us, as we celebrate your birth, that we kneel not to adore the Lord of the mansion but to worship the Lord of the manger. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and Loving God, from whom we receive the gift of life, in whom we learn the meaning of life and to whom we owe the glory of life, we praise your holy name. We praise you for Jesus, who embodied human life that we might embody divine life.

We remember the story of Jesus’ birth. Deep darkness shrouded the world, yet the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. We observe that the violent did not abandon their weapons. The prideful did not surrender their ambition. The wealthy did not share their possessions. The powerful did not honour their positions. The pious did not bother with their confessions. But your light, shining in the darkness, revealed the bankruptcy of violence, the futility of envy, the poverty of riches, the debauchery of power, the hypocrisy of false piety.

We have seen your light, O Lord, yet we continue to walk in shadows. We doubt that, in the nuclear age, a successful war can ever be waged, but we continue to spend dollars for defense and pennies on peace. We recognize that, on an overcrowded planet, mass poverty threatens the rich and poor alike, but the gap between them widens and deepens. We realize that, in a world come of age, the divorce of religion from life would spell the death of religion, yet the link between divine worship and human service grows weak.

Of this betrayal of your will, we wish we could plead innocent. But we know that you know our guilt better than we. So, we approach with penitent hearts, seeking your illuminating presence. Let the light that shone in Bethlehem shine in our world. Let it burst into flames and consume the rage that pits us one against another.

O God, as we survey the world that awaits its Saviour, lift the scales from our eyes that we might behold the people for whom Christ became flesh. And take from us our hardness of heart that we might see that, for them, we were born. As the Word became flesh for us, let the Word become flesh through us.

BENEDICTION: Send us home, O God, in the assurance that the power of the Most High will overshadow us as it did Mary. Then, when your surprises burst upon us, we shall greet them as Mary did hers, in the spirit of faithful surrender, saying, “Behold, we are the servants of the Lord; let it be to us according to your will.”

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

Luke 1:26-38

“A Promise Fulfilled.”

I have always appreciated people who can creatively try and see things from someone else's perspective. Max Lucado, noted writer and preacher, is very good at taking the view point of others to endeavor to discover the truth. In his book, *When God Whispers Your Name*, Lucado takes on the perspective of the angel Gabriel, and tries to imagine what going and telling Mary about her impending pregnancy was like.

This moment in our salvation history is called in many circles *The Annunciation*. Now I've edited Lucado's thoughts a little bit, but here is, I believe, the heart of it. *Gabriel must have truly scratched his head on this one. He wasn't one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity's work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went. And when word got out that God was to become man, Gabriel was enthused.*

Gabriel could envision the moment: the Messiah in a blazing chariot, the King descending on a fiery cloud, an explosion of light from which the Messiah would emerge. That's what Gabriel probably expected. What he never expected, however, was what he got: a slip of paper with a Nazarene address. (Remember that at this time Nazareth was a backwater, insignificant place. Nathaniel said of it, "Can anything good come from there?")

Gabriel read on and saw, "God will become a baby. Tell the mother to name the child Jesus and tell her not to be afraid." Gabriel was never one to question, but this time he wondered. God will become a baby? Gabriel had seen babies before. Have you see what comes out of babies? Hardly befitting for the Creator of the universe. Babies must be carried, bounced and bathed. To imagine some mother burping God on her shoulder-it was beyond what even an angel could imagine.

And what's with this name-Jesus? Such a common name. Call the baby Eminence or Majesty, or Heaven-sent. Anything but Jesus. Gabriel scratched his head. What happened to the good old days? The Sodom and Gomorrah stuff. Flooding the globe. Flaming swords. That's the action he liked. But Gabriel had his orders. Take this message to Mary. Must be a special girl, he assumed as he traveled.

But Gabriel was in for another shock. One look told him Mary was no queen. The mother-to-be was not regal. She was a Jewish peasant barely outgrown her acne and who had a crush on some guy named Joe. And speaking of Joe-what does this fellow know? He's a carpenter. Look at him over there, sawdust and dirt in his beard, nail apron around his waist. You're telling me God is going to have dinner every night with him? You're telling me that the source of wisdom is going to call this guy, "Dad"?

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. "This is a peculiar idea you have, God." Lucado's musings may seem strange to us.

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

Perhaps we might wonder; do angels ever think like this, when God gives orders to them? Probably not, but is it conceivable that Gabriel was stunned by God's plan for the incarnation? Are we stunned by it?

Can we not, at least, admit that in our modern and enlightened existence that we struggle with mystery; especially mysteries like the incarnation? Our modern age is clearly marked as an age of skepticism. We have come to mistrust any and all traditions that have been handed down to us from our parents and grandparents. Traditions, rules, morals and cultural expectations: are all seen as old fashioned.

Unfortunately, this modern skepticism has led to a complete lack of imagination, and a complete lack of a sense of wonder or awe. When we hear of something incredible or fantastic, we search for an explanation instead of reacting with awe. In our quest to seem modern and enlightened, we seek imaginative ways to explain everything in rational and scientific terms. And if we cannot give an explanation, we reject it outright as fantasy.

Kathleen Norris (Amazing Grace) tells of a time she was at ecumenical conference, when one of the presenters proved our lack of mystery, when she addressed the incarnation head on. She said to the ecumenical assembly, "We all know there was no Virgin Birth. Mary was just an unwed, pregnant teenager, and God told her it was okay. That's the message we need to give girls today, that God loves them, and forget all this nonsense about a Virgin Birth."

Norris goes on to report that a collective gasp went up from the crowd. Those sitting near her, were offended, but not by what we might expect. They were offended to hear a well-educated middle-class white woman say that what we need is to tell pregnant teenagers is, "It is okay." Is that what was the most offensive thing she said? Norris' point is; why are we so intent on draining every bit of mystery and wonder from the incarnation, just to sound reasonable, and educated?

When Mary asks Gabriel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin?" She is not asking for scientific explanations. Young as she is, Mary knows where babies come from. Her query is not about how an unfertilized ovum can come to term. She is rather expressing her feelings of being overcome by wonder, awe and yes, some fear. But there is something even more significant going on here than mere annunciation.

Almost every day, particularly with social media, we hear and see incredible things. We gawk, whether by computer or television, at regular folks doing things that seem impossible, or at the very least amusing. There is a whole industry built around finding and displaying the unusual and incredible. *Ripley's Believe it or Not* and the *Guinness Book of World Records* are just two examples of our search for something awesome.

And so as a culture we document and gaze at two headed snakes, the world's tallest person, or heaviest person, out of curiosity, but there is little or no mystery here. Most of these things can be explained by genetics or environmental factors. Also, these curiosities invite us to be mere observers to the incredible.

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

To truly be in awe and deep in mystery, means first and foremost to accept God's invitation to participate in the mystery. When Gabriel comes to Mary, he is not just bringing news of something incredible, he is carrying an invitation. Gabriel is saying in essence, "Mary, God wants to cause you to become pregnant with his Son, are you willing?" Do you want to participate in something truly amazing?

The point often gets missed in talking about this moment in Mary's life, but I believe she could have declined. In ancient Greek Mythology, the gods were always forcing themselves on mortals. Sometimes, legend has it, Zeus would transform into other people or swans or something to seduce unsuspecting women. The resulting progeny, became demigods, or half gods, and became heroes in mythology. Heroes like Hercules.

However, having heard Gabriel, Mary could have said, "Not me. I am not going to be ridiculed by the women of my village. I am not going to set those long tongues a wagging. No way Gabriel! Get away from me. Find someone else." The scandal of this pregnancy alone would have been difficult to accept and certainly to cope with. Not to mention the impact on Joseph. I mean how does Mary explain this to him?

It is a lot to take in, especially for a young adolescent woman. Yet, the true beauty of this mysterious and wondrous moment comes to its heart when Mary replied, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." We forget what true obedience really is. We only truly obey God when we do what we would rather not do.

If God asks us to do something that we want to do, then that's not obeying, that's agreeing. When God asks us to do something that we would rather not do, and we do it anyway, that's obedience. (John Hagee, *The Spirit of Christmas*) To truly serve God means that sometimes, despite the fear of the unknown, we accept God's invitation and place our trust fully on him.

Let me remind you that God never forces himself on anyone, especially a young woman. Instead, he offers an invitation to participate in something incredible, something mysterious, and something awesome. God is always offering invitations to people. All the prophets were given an invitation. The disciples were given an invitation, and you and I are given an invitation to participate in God's wonder and mystery.

In John chapter 1, Philip has met Jesus for the first time, and is so excited by this encounter that he immediately goes to find Nathaniel. Philip says to Nathaniel, "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." "Nazareth!" exclaimed Nathaniel. "Can anything good come from there?" Just come and see for yourself," Philip said.

Philip didn't argue with Nathaniel, nor did Philip have all the answers to all of Nathaniel's questions. Instead, this little interchange is an invitation. "Come see for yourself." Come participate in the mystery of God. No arguments, no coercion, no bribery, just a pure, joyful invitation.

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

Like Mary who wondered how all this could be, and Nathaniel and countless others, wondered about the logic of it all, sometimes you have to just participate in the wonder of it all. Perhaps you've heard this old chestnut of a story about a magician who was booked on a cruise ship as part of the entertainment. In one part of his act, the magician had a parrot do some tricks, and the rest of the time the parrot was to sit on his perch and remain quiet while the rest of the tricks were performed.

At one point the magician produced a bunch of flowers out of thin air, at which time the parrot said, "Squawk! They were up his coat sleeve." This, of course did not make the magician happy, but nevertheless he moved on to the next trick. The magician made his assistant vanish from under a cloak. Once again, the parrot piped up and said, "Squawk! Trap door, trap door."

As one can guess, because of the parrot's interjections the show did not go over very well with the passengers. And to make matters much worse, during one of the performances the ship's boiler blew up and sent most of the crew and passengers into the ocean. As luck would have it, the magician found that he was holding on to a piece of driftwood. And who do you suppose was on the other end of the wood?

You guessed it; the parrot. Three days went by as they drifted on the ocean, and the parrot never said a word. On the fourth day, the parrot looked at the magician and said, "Squawk! Okay, I give up. What did you do with the boat? (1002 Humorous Illustrations, pp. 237-238) What's it going to take to recover your sense of wonder? Like Mary and also Joseph, let's not forget him, we can get caught between what makes sense and what God says to us.

How many times have we done something, believing regardless of the logic, that it was something God wanted us to do, only to find ourselves questioning if it truly was his voice we heard? Our struggle may not be located in a stable in Bethlehem, but we have struggled to make sense of the mysteries of life, while we sat in an emergency waiting room, or doctor's office, or career counselor's office.

How often can we describe ourselves in this life's journey as a confused pilgrim? We want to obey. We want to let ourselves go into the depth of God's mystery, but it is so hard. If this is so for you let me point out something we may not be aware of. In Luke 1:37 we find these words, "For nothing is impossible for God." This is actually not a perfect translation of this verse.

The word often translated as "thing", should more accurately be translated as "word". So, the verse really says, "For with God, no word shall be without power." The Amplified version translates it this way, "For with God nothing is ever impossible and no word from God shall be without power or impossible of fulfillment." When God speaks, we can be assured there is power in those words.

A power to see everything God's word states to come to fruition. God does not just throw around empty verbs and nouns.

Sunday December 24th, 2017

Advent IV

His word is always attended by his Holy Spirit to empower great things to happen. This is how things have been since the creation of the world. God spoke over the chaos and the world came to be. In the midst of chaos and confusion God's word brings hope and order. No wonder John's gospel includes these words, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

When God speaks, "everything that is said will come to pass." We may not know all the details, or the time table, but it shall come to pass. Perhaps that is the best lesson we can attain from today's passage. A lesson, even a young, simple Jewish maiden gave us. Maybe God chose a young woman because the hard experiences of life had not yet stripped her heart of all her wonder and awe.

We are perhaps not as fortunate. Life has thrown us more than a few curve balls, and we are plumb out of wonder. Angered, defeated, our souls bruised and battered, we hear God's word and we demand answers. Why, O God? Why is this happening? When will it end? Why Me? Why my mom or dad? What did I do to deserve this? Can't you give this burden to someone else?

Maybe he can, but we are missing the point. This is our journey, and God has spoken his word into us, and that word has power. When we read the scriptures, every word has power. "I will never leave you nor forsake you", Jesus said. That's power while in the emergency room. "Lo, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." That's power when a loved one dies.

We are not like the pagans who have no hope. The word became flesh and dwells among us. Life is a mystery, filled with wonder and awe, but it is never for God's people without power. Let us commit this day to responding like Mary to the mystery of God by saying, "*I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true.*"