

Advent 4, Year B

December 21, 2014

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.

After our 10:00 Eucharist today, we will green our church. Our altar, unadorned throughout this reflective, expectant season of Advent, will be decked with poinsettias and pine boughs. A Nativity scene will materialize in the back of the church.

Most of our homes are already decorated for Christmas. Presents have been bought and wrapped, cookies baked, cards sent. Drive down the streets at night and you will see houses lit up, from the tasteful to the garish.

I enjoy the Christmas observances as much, if not more, than most. I love the smell of evergreen boughs, logs burning in the fireplace, hot spiced cider; the sight of decorated trees, scarlet-red poinsettias, manger scenes; the delight of giving that perfect gift which shows those dear to me how well they are known and how much they are loved. I thrill in singing Silent Night at the end of our Christmas Eve Eucharist, when all of us are holding flickering candles in the dark as the clock approaches midnight.

Why, I even like fruitcake!

But if all of these *outward* manifestations of Christmas do not leave us changed *inside* (and I am not referring to a warm inner emotion, a temporary generosity, or a nostalgic feeling), then, while our Christmas may be merry and bright, it may have little of Christ in it.

Forget for a moment, if you will, the sights, smells, and sounds of Christmas, and travel back to a scene in Palestine nine months before that Holy Birth. A Jewish girl, 12-15 years old, a virgin, is visited by a messenger from heaven, who tells her that she will conceive a child who will be called Son of the Most High.

Now it is likely that all sorts of pre-conceptions have already entered your heads, for you *know* the story and, by this stage in your lives, you have your own interpretations – perhaps even doubts – concerning it. Some of you will be saying to yourself, “Ah, yes, the Annunciation – I know all about that” – and so you can feel comfortable and secure that you grasp its traditional meaning. You have no problem with the Virgin Birth: it’s a miracle of God, plain and simple. The Holy Spirit came and impregnated Mary, and so her child was God incarnate.

Others of you may have a hard time with this story. “A virgin birth? Physically, scientifically impossible,” you may say. “Superstition.” And so this story of the angel’s visitation becomes a stumbling block to your belief.

Yet I would suggest that *both* these views – the accepting and the skeptical – focus on the question of what is happening physically and factually in a conception that happened over 2000 years ago: was there an egg and a sperm or an egg and the Holy Spirit? Similarly, much of our *Christmas* observances involve the outward and the physical: lights, trees, nativity scenes, presents, decorations, cards, food, etc. But as important as these physical, material symbols are, Christmas asks, “What do they mean? What spiritual truths do they point to?” St. Bonaventure said that we have *three* eyes: the eye of the flesh, the eye of the mind, and the eye of the soul. So, let’s view this story, for a moment, not with the eye of the flesh *nor* with the eye of the mind, but rather with the eye of the soul.

The soul does not see this story in terms of a physical virgin miraculously giving material birth; nor does it stumble over the mental concept of non-sexual conception. Some sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine wrote: “Mary... *first* conceived Jesus in her **heart**, *before* she conceived him in her womb... The Virgin Mary did not have intercourse and conceive, rather she *believed* and conceived...” Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: “If Mary had not first given *spiritual* birth to God, God would never have been born *bodily* from her.” The focus, you see, is **not** on the *physical* virginity of Mary, *nor* on the *scientific* improbability of conception without sperm. The focus is on *virginity of the soul* for each and all of us.

What is “virginity of the soul”? Fr. John Shea (*Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long, New York, Crossroad, 1996, pp. 97-127*) suggests that its principal characteristic is a deep inner longing – a yearning, “a desire to be intimate with the ultimate source of life.” In its longing, soul-virginity is not passive; rather, it is “an *active* hunger, a waiting for One we cannot *make* arrive but whom we trust will appear.” “Let it be with me according

to your word,” Mary says. She actively **wills** that it be so. She does not say to the angel, “Well, if *you* say so...”; she *wants* it to be so; something deep within *longs* for it to be so. God is not going to force Himself on her, to spiritually rape her, if you will. This is consensual intimacy between God’s Spirit and Mary’s spirit on the most vulnerable, trusting level.

Which is not to say there isn’t that moment of fear. Who among us isn’t afraid to make ourself totally vulnerable to another? And it is not simply that in so doing we are letting go *control*; we are also letting go the **loneliness** with which we have come to identify. And so Mary’s consent is an act of courage. Yet she has kept herself for the One she loves, kept herself for this moment; and Divine love casts out fear. (1 John 4:18) Mary *wills* that God take the initiative, to manifest divine life in her life – to give spiritual birth to Christ. And “God’s love is always fruitful... To be in touch with the divine is to enter into [a]... life-giving process.” (*ibid.*)

When we close the eyes of the flesh and of the mind and see through the eye of the soul, virginity becomes a potential for *each* of us, regardless of any past history of physical intimacy. “Virginity as a *physical* fact either ‘is or isn’t’; virginity as a spiritual condition is a possibility of each moment.” (*ibid.*) And so Mary’s story becomes *our* story. 17th-Century poet Angelus Silesius wrote,

What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the Virgin
Unless he brings to me the very selfsame tidings?

What does it profit us if Gabriel’s message is *only* for the Virgin Mary, and not for our **own** virgin souls, our longing souls? We must not hear the story of the angel’s visitation to Mary as something which happens outside of us, in the same way that Christmas trees and poinsettias and holly and ivy are outside of us. No. It is to **us** that Gabriel makes his announcement: “through the power of the Holy Spirit *we* will bring forth from *our* emptiness divine life.” Virginity of the soul is always possible. To choose such virgin-vulnerability takes the courage of Mary. Yet there abides, deep within us, that same hunger, that same longing which Mary had for intimacy with the ultimate Source of Life.

This last week of Advent, our focus tends to jump ahead, to make a preemptive leap to Christmas. It is so easy to do! The outward signs of Christmas have assailed us since Thanksgiving, if not Halloween. Yet our Gospel reminds us that it is still Advent, a time of watchfulness, a time of preparation, a time of waiting. Our soul may yet sense – through the smell of pine boughs, the sight of colored lights, the voices of carols – a trace of that inner hunger, that desire, that longing for intimacy with God which is buried deep within.

What does it profit us if Gabriel greets the Virgin Mary, unless he brings to you and me the same message: “God awaits with eager longing to be born in your virgin soul.”

AMEN