

Luke 1:26-38

The Annunciation and the Magnificat

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Advent 4, December 24, 2023

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.

This is Annunciation Sunday. It seems to me that the point in Luke, which is entirely different from the briefer Annunciation in Matthew, is that God is showing his preference for working with the poor and powerless.

First, to clear the decks by referring to Matthew, the Annunciation in Matthew occurs to Joseph.

Matt 1¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that the point in Matthew is that the angel, unnamed, reassures Joseph that Mary is not damaged goods. Joseph needs to be reassured. Mary's role is passive.

Not so in Luke. Joseph isn't part of the equation. The angel appears to a virgin and announces to her that she will conceive. Only in Luke do Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. Only in Luke is the first public announcement to shepherds. Luke emphasizes the ability of the powerless to reveal the power of God to transform and save the world.

The balance of this sermon will be on Mary's response, the Magnificat.

I have been saying the Magnificat daily since the 17th. It is the tradition of the church to say the Magnificat daily for the week preceding Christmas Eve, and to use the verses of Hymn 56, O Come O Come Emmanuel, for the antiphons. There is a wonderful

serenity in immersing oneself in the daily office and the liturgy of the church, and I begin weekdays and Saturdays with the office.

You heard the Magnificat in the prelude, see Dr. Hurd's notes on the music for more information. You'll also find it paraphrased in the post-communion hymn. The postlude will feature the Great O Antiphons, again consult Dr. Hurd's notes on the music for details.

The words of the Magnificat, since they are well known, especially to this parish, can pass through us without our hearing them, and that is unfortunate. It is all too easy, especially at this time of year, to ignore the reality of Christianity in favor of the sweetness of Christ's birth. On the other hand the reality is recognizable in the church calendar. Jesus was born in poverty to a brown woman whose pregnancy was suspicious. He grew into a perceived threat to the status quo and was crucified. The reality is reflected in our worshiping using the full bible, not just the sweet parts.

Let us turn to the two saints' days which occur around Christmas. The first is the Feast of St. Stephen, Dec 26. We know very little about Stephen, but we do know that according to Acts he is a Deacon and the first Christian martyr. The church placed his feast day the day after Christmas so we could remember the cost of being Christian. The second feast day is that of the Holy Innocents, Dec 29. I imagine that many do not even know what this day observes. The birth narrative of Matthew, the story that contains the Wise Men or Magi, tells us that Herod had all children under two slaughtered. Interestingly the gospel gives the impression that Herod killed both boys and girls, but we can't be sure. This feast also testifies to the cost of Christianity, a cost borne in this case by the innocent. The Holy Innocents were slaughtered because Jesus was born, not because of any action on their part, or their parents' part. They were a potential threat to power, and they were slaughtered because they were two or younger. Jesus escapes being killed because his parents flee to Egypt.

Given the atrocities in the Holy Land today where do we think Jesus would be born? On October 7 when Hamas invaded Israel it was clear that our Incarnate Lord would've been born in the midst of the Israelis who were so brutally bombed, raped, assaulted, tortured and taken hostage. Today, with more than 20,000 Gazans killed, more than two thirds being women and children, Jesus would be born in Gaza. God is always with the powerless. For the Israelis on October 7 their only problem was where they lived. They were Holy Innocents. For the Gazan children and noncombatants their only issue is where they live. Power cares nothing for the innocent. Our Incarnate Lord does. It is a tragedy of unimaginable horror that we continue to produce Holy Innocents.

To get back to the Gospels, setting aside questions about the historicity of this passage, what does it say about Christianity when at the beginning of Matthew we read of capricious evil happening to babies? Why didn't God prevent this? Why did God choose to reveal Godself in a helpless child, and endanger the future of other helpless children?

The Magnificat gives us a clue.

Luke 1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered

the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

Mary, whose life will never be a bed of roses, is depicted as saying that the Lord has done great things for her because he has looked with favor upon her lowliness. Once again we can only understand what the Lord has done to Mary as showing great favor by redefining the term. Mary does not become rich; Mary does not lead a life of ease. Mary does not have a son who achieves great power and respect, at least in his lifetime. Mary has become the Christ bearer, the *χριστοφορος*/christopher, or the God bearer, *θεοτοκος*/theotokos, and she is only blessed in a sense which defies human understanding.

Her world was much like our world. Power was threatened easily. Herod was threatened easily. He had power and he exerted it ruthlessly when he felt threatened. He was dictator for more than one day.

Power continues to exert itself ruthlessly when threatened. The wonder is that those who have very little are so easily able to threaten those who have so much. The birth of Jesus threatened Herod, the poor today threaten many in our society and we say that there are too many for us to help so close the borders.

When Luke was written, and the Magnificat written down, the church was wrestling with the issues of being powerless. The Resurrection has happened but the Parousia, the Second Coming, had not. Christians were few in number, poor, ignored or despised and seen as at best an annoyance and at worst as insignificant. Were they really the Hope for the World? The church is the Hope for the World despite all appearances just as a baby born of a virgin in an obscure part of the Roman Empire was the Hope for the World, despite all appearances.

The Magnificat is about responding to powerlessness and lack of control with praise for God who has all power and control, and whose power and control we cannot and do not understand. Mary's song is a song of wonder, she has been exalted, but not to be a lady of leisure, a scholar, a patron of the arts. She continues to be poor, insignificant, at least in her lifetime, and powerless. Christmas calls us to be one with the poor.

Grace Mudd shared a meme on Instagram this week in which a woman is saying that Santa Claus doesn't discriminate between the naughty and nice, they all receive gifts. He discriminates between the rich and the poor. Santa judges children by the wealth of their parents. He gives the rich many presents and the poor few or none. The poor are hungry and neglected at the time of year when we remember that Mary gave birth in a stable. Our world refuses to get the message of Christmas. Gifts do not measure faith and holiness and God in Christ is not Santa Claus. Unlike Santa, God shows a preference for the poor.

Christmas is about embracing powerlessness and seeing it as normative. Christmas is about seeing powerlessness as our condition, and giving into it. It is not about resigning ourselves to it, but about our accepting it as who we are. The strength in powerlessness is that it means we place all of our hope on God, and we live with what God gives us. Neither Saint Stephen nor the Holy Innocents benefited in any material way from the birth of Christ. But both exhibited powerlessness and pointed to a God who is with the powerless.

Accepting powerlessness does not mean that we will be healthy, wealthy or wise. It simply means that God will love us for who we are, and if we're committed to our

powerlessness, that maybe we will love ourselves for who we are. If we can put aside all of the expectations and hopes for this time and merely accept ourselves for who we are, in our powerlessness, then we will be on our way to becoming truly Christian.

Christianity calls for the vulnerability in each of us, honors that vulnerability, and says that it is precious in God's sight. That vulnerability will not be honored by the world, it might threaten the world, but it may give us meaning. We live out that meaning by caring, as God does, for the powerless.

May the remaining hours of Advent fill you with the expectation of embracing our Savior and seeing honor, as his mother did, in being united with the poor.