

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
December 24, 2017

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
Text: St. Luke 1:26-38
Theme: GOD BECOMES SMALL

In Nomine Jesu

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

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It's the fourth ... the last ... Sunday in Advent. I bet I could've played "gotcha" this morning because I'd be surprised if when you woke up you didn't think, "Hey, it's Christmas Eve morning!" Not yet, I say. Back to the fourth ... the last ... Sunday in Advent. The rest of the story comes later today – be here at 7 p.m. for the rest of that story, OK?

But here's the deal this morning. All the long weeks of waiting and anticipation are almost over. It's a season of mystery and enchantment. All other words about it give way to the timelessness of St. Luke's Gospel telling of that story.

But not before we hear this morning the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that, despite her rational and perhaps biologically correct protests, she'll give birth to the child whose kingdom will have no end. The sacredness of silence, the flicker of candles, the wreath, the melodies of our songs, the sharing of Holy Communion, the presence of children all will tell us best of the Christ Child's birth in a few hours.

To get us focused, the word of the day is "incarnation." Oh, you won't find it in Luke's gospel. The angel speaks to Mary with much simpler, more direct words. However, the Christian Church, in its attempt to wrap it's mind around the mystery of Mary's pregnancy, has come up with what is called the doctrine of the

“Incarnation.” It’s God’s gift of the Word – his only Son – becoming flesh and dwelling among us. It’s the gift of light that comes into the darkness of our broken world, light that will never be quenched by the spell of darkness again.

“Incarnation.” It means that the God who stands outside of time enters into time. The God who is infinite becomes finite. The God who is all-powerful becomes all-vulnerable. The God whose own creative word-womb gave birth to the world, now is born of Mary’s womb to bear good news of peace on earth.

I think that one key for understanding this mind-blowing concept – this teaching of the “incarnation” – is this. **Think small.** How ironic, right? We live in a culture that prides itself on thinking big, bold, and brash. And especially at this time of year, we have to retrain ourselves to look for God in the small and the unexpected.

This Christmas, the ways of the world are once again being turned upside down. In a world consumed by never-ending violence and life-shattering warfare, the soft cries of Mary’s child are more deafening than any bomb or ICBM or roadside IED. It’s time for a sacred reminder that God’s power is displayed not in the weapons of war, but belongs to the innocence and vulnerability of a newborn baby.

Sadly – and to the contrary, though – most of our days are spent competing with ourselves and one another, climbing the ladder of upward mobility, trying to prove our worth in the various arenas of our lives. We press for success in the classroom, in our homes, at our workplaces, and even for notable recognition in the amount of time we give back to our church or our community.

You see, deep down in our religious DNA, our centuries-old false belief that somehow what we do and how we live will make the difference for us in eternity still dictates too much of our living. We still live like if we only try hard enough, we’ll earn the love and approval of our family and friends. If we only study long enough we’ll make the grade and validate our sense of self-worth. If we only pray long enough and do all the right things we’ll earn God’s love and blessings.

In the face of this “earnings and competition mentality,” Mary responds in the wonder of faith not with what she will do to make this all happen but with an open and trusting heart humbly and patiently waiting for God to “do with me as you will.” She is servant, not mistress, of her future in God’s hands. “Count me in,” is her witness to God and to us

Yes, in the face of this “earnings and competition mentality” the child in Mary’s womb is a brightly lit and red stop sign. He calls us to put the brakes on our efforts to earn our own salvation. And here’s the good news. Because we could

never work our way up to God, God becomes small for us, a living, breathing, tangible means of grace bundled in a young girl's arms. To the day of his death Christopher Hitchens – that bold and brash Atheist spokesman – derided this truth as balderdash. How to be pitied those like him whose hope is in this life alone, as St. Paul grieves.

The King of Kings is born in a stable with a few lowly shepherds as guests of honor. Who'd have thought? The gift of Christmas is God's love for the world and the package is flesh and blood. And in God's miracle it's the most powerful force that the world has ever known.

We who've been hardened by the toughness of our lives, bruised and scarred by shattered dreams and broken hopes, have become steeled to the brutal stories of the world around us. We're haunted by the dark places in our own lives and exhausted by our efforts to earn approval from others; we need this gift of God becoming small, this gift of tenderness and mercy delivered in a manger.

You and I are like shepherds in the dark night. We're searching the horizon for any signs of hope, for the promise that this world is not all there is, that the darkness will give way to a light that shall not be overcome.

But more often than not, despite our best intentions, we resemble that old miser named Silas Marner. We got to know him in George Elliot's book that bore his name as its title. Elliot tells of this reclusive, hardened man who blocks out the world around him and gives himself only to a spinning loom and to the accumulation of gold, all of which he hides under his bed.

One day he comes home and finds that his gold is gone. Some thief has stolen the treasure of his life, and he's left distraught and empty. Every day thereafter he'd returned home, hoping beyond hope that the gold had reappeared. But it hadn't.

Then one day he came home and saw a glint of bright yellow on the floor. His heart leapt for joy – he was sure that his gold had been returned. But when he reached out his hand he found, instead of hard coin, soft curls on his floor. A sleeping child. Elliot tells it like this.

He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far off life. It stirred old quiverings of tenderness – old impressions of awe of some power presiding over his life.... [We] older human beings, with our inward turmoil, feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky.

That's what happens to us whether we're young or old this time of year, fresh from – or thinking we've seen the end of – the glitz of the shopping malls,

frazzled by the hurried pace of the season, worn thin by the year's sweaty work of succeeding and advancing, enslaved by our own quest after whatever form gold takes in our own lives. Even if it's just avoiding losing a job or foreclosure on our homes. Even if it's the depth of darkening depression and anxiety in these stress-generating days. This last Sunday of Advent we come face to face with the way God works in the world. God becomes small.

We can remember as Silas Marner took the little girl in his lap,

... trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. He could only have said that the child had come instead of the gold – that the gold had turned into the child.

Our Christ Child who's coming near is truth and grace. He comes to a world overcome with darkness to be the light that will forever shine. He comes to a world overrun by senseless noise to sing the melody of peace. He comes as a testament to the small and quiet ways God goes about redeeming creation in a world consumed by the big and the powerful. He comes to your life and my life as a priceless gift – the only gift that really matters.

But remember, the gift is here already this morning. It's still hours before we go to Bethlehem and manger and adoring parents and shepherds and angel songs. Here, the only gift that really matters ... the one we "remember" – made really true again – in the Body and the Blood given and shed for us on Calvary comes again so that all the promise, the hope, the gift of that Christ Child becomes ours again. In the gift ... in life and salvation.

I've got to confess that I certainly was not as willingly compliant to that still small voice of God calling in God's baptismal call to me. Maybe you weren't or aren't as well ... maybe none of us joyfully give way to our vocation as Mary did. It probably would have helped us if a real live angel had showed up to make the message a little clearer and more certain.

But let's join in her theme? "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Count me in. Thanks be to God!

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN

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Soli Deo Gloria