

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 24, 2017

Luke 1:26-38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christmas is almost here. Almost! But not yet. This year we have the shortest possible season of Advent, three weeks and one day, with the fourth Sunday falling on the morning of Christmas Eve. This might be the ultimate “wait for it” moment in all of the church calendar. But it is well worth it, especially as we get for our gospel text this morning the annunciation to Mary. Surprisingly, we get this reading only once every three years during Advent. Personally, I think it’s an every-year sort of text, so I make sure to get it into Advent Evening prayer in those years when we don’t have it for the Sunday reading. It gives us important background information for the Christmas reading that we will hear this evening.

But that’s not all. The story of the annunciation, together with the supporting texts that surround it in the first chapter of Luke, not only sets up the story of Jesus birth, but also begins to paint a picture of how God is doing something new and altogether different in Jesus Christ. And this is something that many of us Christians have often failed to appreciate. It’s something we’ve lived with for hundreds of years—seventeen hundred, to be precise, ever since the Emperor Constantine declared an end to the Roman Empire’s persecution Christianity and sought instead to coopt the Christian faith it for his own purposes. Since then the main stream of professing Christians have considered it possible, to one degree or another, to be loyal subjects of king and country while at the same time calling Jesus Christ their Lord and praying for the coming of his kingdom. In the process, we have operated under the belief that church and state can cooperate, to their mutual benefit, that our human kingdoms can play a positive and constructive role in advancing the Christian faith. Martin Luther certainly thought so, and the Reformation would not have succeeded, to the extent that it did succeed, without the help of the state. But what we miss at the heart of the gospel and its proclamation of God’s kingdom is its fundamental critique of all human power structures. If they are perhaps a necessary evil in the short term, they are not what God intends for us in the long term. On the contrary, God plans to cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly, to feed the hungry and send the rich away empty. Confusion on this point leads some to believe that this is and ought to be a Christian country, and that Christianity deserves a privileged place in our society. They want prayer in public schools, state funding for Christian schools, and “In God We Trust” on our currency. They see in modern times a clash of cultures between Christians and non-believers, a battle they intend to win for Christ. They believe that there is a war on Christmas, and get upset when people say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” or fail to put Christmas trees on their beverage cups.

I’m would like to propose, however, that a more genuinely Christian approach – an approach more in line with the coming kingdom of God that the birth of Jesus ushers in – is that we instead consider loosing such a war for Christian dominance over our public culture. I ran across an article a couple of years ago with exactly that title, “Why we should lose the War on Christmas.” That article noted that the birth of Jesus took place not in Rome, not in the center of the dominant ancient culture, and that Jesus himself made a sharp distinction between the ways the world works and the ways God works. Jesus did not come to impose God’s reign from above by making himself a partner with the dominant culture and the ruling elites. He came instead to the margins of power and culture with a counter-cultural message of peace and hope, and a promise to turn the world upside down, as the Magnificat proclaims, that song sung during Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth that we sang in place of the psalm this morning, and that we

have been singing in Evening Prayer for the past three weeks. In fact, the whole of Luke's first chapter is a subtle demonstration of just how different God's approach is from ours. It starts with the story of Zechariah, a priest in the Jerusalem temple, assigned the honor of entering the sanctuary of the temple to offer incense before God, when an angel appears to him. You could say that it's the particular job of a priest to intercede between God and God's people. And here he is, speaking with an angel, a direct messenger from God, who tells him that what he has been praying for all these years will finally come to pass: his wife Elizabeth is now, after all these years, pregnant. Only Zechariah doesn't believe it, because she has never been able to bear children and she is now well past her child-bearing years. So Zechariah is struck mute, unable to speak until his son John is born. The next story in Luke's first chapter is our gospel reading this morning, another appearance of the angel Gabriel, but this time to Mary, who is nobody in particular, but whose fiancé is a descendant of King David. Mary gets similar news to Zechariah, only it's about her. She too is, impossibly, pregnant. And she reacts in almost exactly the same way as Zechariah. "How can this be?" she responds, only her reaction is not taken by the angel as disbelief, or else she gets a second chance. Whatever the case may be, she trusts the angel's word. You see, I hope, the irony. Zechariah's *job* is to intercede between God and God's people. Of all people he should be prepared for God's messenger. And yet, when push comes to shove, he does not trust the message, while the lowly nobody Mary does. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;" she says, "Let it be with me according to your word." Martin Luther considered this response of Mary to be the greatest of miracles. The virgin birth, he thought, pales by comparison. As the angel said, "nothing will be impossible with God." God is almighty, wrote Luther. If God wants a virgin to conceive he can make it happen, no problem. But for Mary to *believe* this message of the angel, to trust this promise – that, thought Luther, is indeed miraculous. It's not hard to understand why Luther thought this was such a big deal. A nobody teenage girl on the edge of the civilized world trusts God's promise, and through her God is born into the world, God comes among us as one of us, not as the conquering hero, not as the one who will impose his will on us, but as the one who will be scorned by the dominant culture and put to death by the powers that be. And it is through his death and resurrection, through hundreds and thousands of nobodies like Mary on the margins of society, that God in Jesus Christ has worked and continues to work to transform the world God so loves one heart at a time, and to bring to pass the kingdom of God. May God grant that we might be included in the number of all those nobodies, responding in faith to God's promises, and inspired to serve as God's humble agents of love and reconciliation in the world. And as we wait in these final hours to celebrate the birth of our Lord into our world and into our hearts, may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.