

He is coming among sinners to make them holy

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT [b]

December 24, 2017

LUKE 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ **And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.** ³² **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 father David,** ³³ **and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."** ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

The first thing we notice is the birth given to a virgin. This cannot happen, we know. Virgins cannot be with child, it just doesn't work that way, it's not of the natural order.

There is a natural order, after all. It begins with the man and the woman being made one flesh. The oneness includes the man and the woman coming together so that, as the Lord gives it, they will be fruitful and multiply. Anything apart from that is outside the natural order—it can't happen.

But there is One who created the natural order. He who set the trees in the ground to produce fruit, the stars in the sky to continue in their appointed circuits, who gave the fish to live in water and the deer to live in grass—this natural order is not some abstract set of rules, not some happenstance organization of random adaptations, this natural order is how he who created and upholds all things by his word of power set everything in proper order, so that all things would work together to bring forth and uphold life.

He who created all has now sent a messenger to Mary to say,

Behold, Mary, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

So the first thing we notice is the child given to a virgin. It's outside the natural order; it's a miracle.

But maybe the first thing we notice should be that God, the Creator of all, has entered his creation, coming in the body and blood of a human, in order to redeem his creation.

If it is against the natural order, and is a miracle for a virgin to be given a child, then how much more is it against the natural order and is a miracle for Holy God to look upon this creation he spoke into being, and upon these humans he named as his Image, and seeing their rebellion against him and their despising of his gifts, for him to come into creation to dwell with them as a fellow human, to take their rebellion upon himself, so that he could put it to death in his own body on the cross, and thereby redeem them, purchasing them back into his gift of life?—this is the miracle.

Once God has determined to give himself over to death on behalf of the sinners he loves, once he has set in place his plan to redeem his creation from sin and death, once he has given his promise to Adam and Eve to crush the head of Satan by Eve's descendant, once he has given oath upon his own Name to let himself be despised and rejected by men in order to suffer for us, for him on his own back to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows and be wounded for our transgressions, once he has publicly announced this through the mouth of the prophets so that every sinner may know the comfort of the forgiveness of sins, then to come in the flesh as the child of a Virgin is maybe not so much a miracle as it is simply the way that the Creator of all things and all people has chosen to do it.

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[Luke 1:34]

The Holy Spirit has honored Mary to take her up into his use, his holy purpose, of bringing God the Son as a gift to Earth.

He has come to Mary in the Word. It has never happened this way before. Will never happen this way again. The gift is to Mary, she is most honored among women.

Her child is God the Son. He is holy, he is coming among sinners to make them holy. No sinner can make himself holy; no sinner can do holy works, even, for how does something pure and holy come from something unclean?

But he, the holy Son of God, will cleanse the sinner, make the sinner holy, and bring the sinner into honor before his Father.

Luke 1:38:

³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

The Holy Spirit has come to Mary in the Word delivered by the angel. Though Mary is only a human, and all humans are born to sinful flesh, yet she has been blessed by God, he has taken her up into his holy use, so that, according to his Word, she is now his servant, his holy vessel.

John of Damascus, a Church father from around the year 700AD, said this about the way the Holy Spirit works,

Just as all things whatsoever God made he made by the operation of the Holy Spirit, so also it is by the operation of the Spirit that these things are done which surpass nature and cannot be discerned except by faith alone. "How shall this be done to me," asked the blessed Virgin, "because I know not a man?" The archangel Gabriel answered, "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you." And now you ask how the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine ... the blood of Christ. And I tell you that the Holy Spirit comes down and works these things which are beyond description and understanding.

The Holy Spirit who came upon Mary by the Word and made her servant of the Lord, also by the Word comes upon the bread and wine, and makes it servant, a holy instrument, bringing to us the Body and Blood of Mary's child.

That's why the pastor doesn't just serve out bread and wine. He can do that, but that wouldn't be called holy—it would be called a wine and cheese party.

But the pastor is given to serve out the bread and wine, having spoken the appointed words over it, the words of our Lord declaring it to be his Body and his Blood; and in those words is the Holy Spirit.

The bread and wine are now holy not because they are of themselves in any way holy, but because they have been taken up by the Holy Spirit in his holy use.

And his holy use it to deliver Jesus. ***You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus***, the angel said to Mary. Now the Word to us is, ***Take and eat, take and drink, this is my body, this is my blood, for the forgiveness of your sins***. The Holy Spirit has bound himself to those words. At those words, the bread and the wine are holy, taken up into his use, delivering Jesus to you and me.

You and I, we are now taken up into use by the Holy Spirit. Where Jesus comes to us in his Body and Blood, where he come to us by his Word, he is their breathing into us the Holy Spirit, forgiving our sins, making us servants of the Lord.

We are not holy of ourselves. How can any sinner ever claim that?

But the Holy Spirit is holy in that he is making us holy. That's what it means to have your sins forgiven; that's what it means to be made a servant of the Lord; that's what it means to confess along with Mary, her Son, who is Son of the Most high God, and who is named Jesus.

You belong to him, Mary's Son. He has taken your sin upon himself. He has clothed you in his righteousness. You are his servant, and this gift is all according to his Word.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.