

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priestⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus saith [SETH] the LORD, Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money. For thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD, My people went down aforetime into Egypt to sojourn there; and the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what have I here, saith [SETH] the LORD, that my people is taken away for nought? they that rule over them make them to howl, saith the LORD; and my name continually every day is blasphemed. Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith [SETH] unto Zion, Thy God reigneth; Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion.

“Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-fifth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.^{iv}

“... And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias [zeck-are-EYE-uss], and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed [**SHOWD**] strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty

from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever. And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

With these words a young Jewish woman becomes immortal. Mary is rightly called “first among the saints” and “Queen of Heaven.” Her story is the story of all faithful servants of God. Let’s look at that story more closely.

Here is a young woman, probably in her early teens, engaged but not yet married to a man who makes a living working with his hands. Suddenly an angel appears to tell her that she is going to have a baby.

Well, that’s a surprise. Mary is a virgin, and everybody knows that it takes a man as well as a woman to produce a baby. But this is not going to be an ordinary baby. This baby is going to be fully divine as well as fully human. God will supply the divinity; Mary will supply the humanity. But the question is, “how can this be?” And the answer is, “From a human point of view, this is impossible, but trust me, God can make it happen.” So Mary says, “Okay.”

Now you and I might have some other questions, such as, “Why me? Why not some beautiful and well educated woman of the aristocracy? Why not a wealthy woman who could give this child everything? Why not a prophetess or the wife of a priest? Why select a simple peasant girl for this critical assignment?”

Well, Mary did not ask that question, perhaps because she knew the answer. As she said in the *Magnificat*, “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree.”

You see, God has a way of working with the least promising materials to accomplish His greatest work. As St. Paul says in I Corinthians, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” So God chose Jacob over Esau and Isaac over Ishmael. He chose David, the youngest, to be king, over his more impressive brothers. He picked a disrespected bunch of nomads and slaves to be his chosen people. Perhaps one reason that Mary was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah is that she knew all that. And when Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children,” perhaps He learned that from His mother.

Now before I go any further, I would like to say a word to the children. Children, don’t think that because you are small and have so much to learn and still depend on grown-ups to guide you and provide for you, don’t think that you are unimportant or that you can’t make a difference in the world. Jesus often turned to children and offered them as examples of the kind of faith that God can work with. You have the same thing to offer God that everyone else has. You have yourself. You have your love and your obedience. That is all that anyone of any age has to offer God. Okay? Now let me get back to the adults.

We are told in the Book of Genesis that the Spirit of God moved over watery darkness at the beginning of creation. Then, as the Spirit hovered over the womb of the universe, the Word of God entered in. The darkness became light. The chaos became order. And the result was a new kind of life. You can read about that in Genesis 1.

Now that same Spirit is about to hover over the watery darkness of the Virgin’s womb, and same Word of God is about to enter in. And the Child to be born will be the progenitor of a new race of men and women.

He will be “the second Adam.” He will be “the first-born among many siblings.” He will bring light out of darkness, order out of chaos, and life out of death.

The concept of virgin birth is important precisely because it expresses and protects the divine initiative in this process of creation and salvation. The human role is a responsive one. We can respond to God’s initiative by saying “no” or by saying “yes”, but we cannot initiate the process of creation or salvation ourselves.

The sin of Eve lay in attempting to seize the initiative from God; to create an identity for herself instead of accepting the identity God gave her, and to claim the right to determine for herself what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. That is what led to the disruption of the order of creation.

But Mary, as the second Eve, was content to respond to God’s initiative by saying “yes.” She could have said, “no” and God would have respected that. She would have saved herself a lot of grief and pain in this world if she had said, “no”. But Mary is exalted and glorified now precisely because she said “yes” to what God required of her. “I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.”

Donald Coggan, former Archbishop of Canterbury, pointed out to me one time the parallel between those words and the words of Jesus when he said to God on the eve of the crucifixion, “Not my will but yours be done.” Lord Coggan suggested that Jesus learned that attitude from His mother and passed it along to us when He taught us to pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is just such obedience to the will of God that leads through death to life and through suffering to glory.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I are called to glory. Just like Mary and all the other saints, we are called to obedience. We are called to place at God’s disposal, not only all that we have but all that we are. You and I are called upon to be the agents through which God does his redeeming work in the world today. We are called to receive

the Word of God implanted in our midst, to nurture it, protect it and present it to the world, which is just what Mary did. Mary, you see, is the personification of the Church at its best.

The Orthodox call her “Theotokos”, bearer of God. And that’s what you are too when you bring the love and healing power of God to a world that is crying out for it.

Fr. Gerry Kramer^{vi} once asked in Bible study, “What is the role of the Church in building the kingdom of God?” I submit to you that Mary has the answer: “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”

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The Episcopal Church of the Annunciation
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ⁱ *Retired Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Chester, PA.*

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 52:1-10 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 1:26-56 (KJV).*

^v *St. Luke 1:38 (RSV).*

^{vi} *Rector of the Church of the Annunciation.*