

As we approach Christmas, with its customs of giving and receiving gifts, could we have any greater gift than this, that God has put away our sins and overcome the shadow of death, so that we may enjoy eternal life with Him? And if we are grateful to our human benefactors, who give us merely decorative or useful objects as part of our Christmas festivities, how much more should we feel toward the One Who gave us Himself so that we could have every thing of any value or significance that we lack?

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¹ This sermon was originally written for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, based upon the Lessons in the English, South African, and Indian Table of Lessons of 1922, as revised in 1928.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 2:1-10 (KJV).

⁴ St. Luke 1:26-56 (KJV).

⁵ St. Luke 1:34-35 (RSV).

⁶ St. Luke 1:26-38.

⁷ St. Luke 1:39-56.

⁸ St. Luke 1:41-42.

⁹ St. Luke 1:46-55.

¹⁰ Genesis 17:15-19, 18:1-15, & 21:1-8.

¹¹ Genesis 17:5b-8.

¹² I Samuel 1:7-20.

¹³ St. Luke 1:11-25 & 1:57-80.

¹⁴ Isaiah 40:1-11.

¹⁵ Malachi 4:5-6, where the Messiah is depicted as a returned Elijah.

¹⁶ St. Matthew 3:11-12; St. Mark 1:7-8; St. Luke 3:16-17; St. John 1:15, 1:19-36, 3:23-36, 5:32-33, 10:41; Acts 13:25.

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Second Sunday in Advent¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“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 the Lord, Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money. For thus saith 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 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 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 twenty-sixth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.⁴

“... And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee [**GAL-ih-lee**], named Nazareth [**NAZ-uh-reth**], 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 [**JOO-duh**]; And entered into the house of Zacharias [**ZACK-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

riah [**zack-are-EYE-uh**] and Elizabeth, as the parents of that child, became God’s agents in producing the man who would become the herald and forerunner whom the prophets Isaiah¹⁴ and Malachi¹⁵ had said would come to tell of the advent of the Messiah.¹⁶

The fourth and most important of these miraculous birth narratives, the one to which the others all point, is of course that of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Here, as before, we have a biological impediment to the conception of a child; in this case, it is not an organic defect or disease but it is, instead, the lack of a human father to contribute to the conception of the child. Here, as before, we have the miraculous intervention of God who, in concert with a human agent – here the Blessed Virgin Mary – enables the desired conception to take place.

And here, as before, the human birth of this particular child, as aided by divine participation, is a vital step in God’s plan for the salvation and reconciliation of all of human kind. In fact, it is the single most important step in that process, for it is the coming to us of our Saviour, the One Who will cover the sin which is an innate part of our human nature and Who will, thereby, make it possible for us to be received by God as though we were truly righteous.

Conclusion:

The entire process of redemption, and of that redemption’s components of justification and sanctification, is a complex and mysterious one. As with most of the critical facts of our Faith, however, it is not necessary for any worshipper to have a deep theological understanding of it. All that is required is to understand that these facts exist, that they exist as God’s gifts to us, and that believing in them and accepting them is all that is required for us to receive their benefits.

not told what sort of organic problem they had, we are told that together they were barren, although Elkanah [**el-KAY-nuh**] was able to have children with his other wife.

As with Abraham and Sarah, God intervened in their difficulty and enabled Hannah to conceive a son, whom they named Samuel. Here is another example of how God permitted humans to become His partners in achieving something that was important to His plan for humanity; here that important step was the birth of a child who, dedicated to God's service out of his parents' gratitude for his birth, would be raised in the religious sanctuary of the time under the care of Eli, the Israelites' national prophet and priest.

Because Samuel was thus apprenticed to Eli, he was able in due time to succeed Eli in the religious leadership of Abraham's descendants. This permitted him, first, to eradicate the corruption in the prophetic and priestly offices that had been introduced by Eli's wayward sons. Then, after Samuel had purifying the Jewish national worship, it enabled him to serve as God's agent in anointing and installing Israel's first two kings, Saul and then Saul's successor, David.

The third such miraculous birth occurs in the New Testament and is the account of the conception and birth of John the Baptist.¹³ This appears in the same Chapter of St. Luke as does today's Second Lesson, immediately before that Lesson begins, and, again, it exhibits the same two features of divine/human collaboration to effect a purpose that is ultimately for humanity's benefit.

As with Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah [**zack-are-EYE-uh**] and Elizabeth, who would become the parents of John the Baptist, were elderly, well beyond the normal age of fertility. But as was the case with Abraham and Sarah, God entered into their situation and resolved their difficulty by causing them to conceive the needed child. Thus Zecha-

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:

"And Mary said to the angel, 'How shall this be, since I have no husband?' And 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 called
holy,
the Son of God.""⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

We are so accustomed to Scripture's familiar accounts and lessons relating to Christmas – both the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and the New Testament reports of the occurrences that surrounded Jesus's birth – that we tend to concentrate on the warm, comforting details, such as the helpless baby laid in a straw-filled manger, or the chorus of approving angels – and to overlook the larger and deeper significance of these events.

This is especially true with such fundamental, and therefore constantly-repeated images, as the account in today's Second Lesson of the angel Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary of the coming conception and birth of the Christ child⁶ and, later in the same Chapter from St. Luke, of Our Lady's Visitation to her cousin, Elizabeth,⁷ of John the Baptist and Elizabeth's homage to the Son of God *in utero*,⁸ and Mary's accompanying wonderful prayer that we call the *Magnificat*.⁹

Theme:

These well-known circumstances of the conception and birth of Jesus are only the culmination of a series of miraculous conceptions and births in which God first manifested His special power to intervene in human affairs and then graciously allowed humans to participate with Him in advancing those affairs toward His chosen end for us.

Let me repeat that: The conception and birth of Jesus was only the last in a series of miraculous conceptions and births by which God first manifested His special power to intervene in human affairs and then graciously allowed humans to participate with Him in advancing those affairs toward His goal of our living in fellowship with Him.

Development:

The first of these miraculous conceptions that comes to mind is the account in Genesis¹⁰ of the birth of Abraham's heir, Isaac. The problem there was that both Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were so old – Abraham was ninety-nine -- that, in the normal course of events, they were not able to conceive a child.

God's grace was more than sufficient to overcome this obstacle and, as a special divine dispensation, Sarah was enabled to conceive Isaac. Notice two important facets of this event. Firstly, in this situation, God entered into a human dilemma and exercised His grace and mercy to permit humans, who on their own could not resolve it – here Abraham and Sarah – to cooperate with Him in overcoming their adversity. This use by God of human agents and collaborators to work His intended ends is an important feature of all of these miraculous birth narratives.

Secondly, by those human agents and collaborators' partaking in this divine/human endeavour, they participated with God in achieving an important step forward in God's plan for humanity. In this case, of course, the necessary step was the birth of an heir to Abraham, a man who would be able to continue the ancestral line which, God had promised, would become not just a great nation but a multitude of nations and the party to an everlasting covenant with God, as well as the occupants of the Holy Land.¹¹

In other words, this sort of cooperation and collaboration between God and mankind to produce a miracle is, ultimately, intended to work a benefit for mankind.

Another such miraculous birth, which exhibits these same two features, is recorded in the Old Testament in the First Book of Samuel.¹² There we are told of a man, Elkanah [el-KAY-nuh] and one of his wives, Hannah. While we are