

Sermon for Sunday, December 21, 2008

Fourth Sunday of Advent

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson **2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16**
Psalm **Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26**
Second Lesson **Romans 16:25-27**
Gospel **Luke 1:26-38**

We've almost made it, haven't we? We're almost at the crèche, almost peering into the human face of God. We're almost stepping into all of the splendor and the mystery of the Christ Mass, aren't we?

But not quite: on this Fourth Sunday of Advent the Church pauses one more time, entering once again into the waiting, the watching, and the wondering that we've been implored to engage in all during this Advent season.

In their very own wisdom, the lessons of the Church detain us. Halting our fast progress they bid us to turn our greedy eyes from the folds of swaddling clothes, at least for now. Instead, we're asked to take into account blessed Mary's face. Mary, protector of frail flesh, protects us from falling flat in error before we kneel at last before her newborn Son, the only begotten of God.

We're held back on this Sunday to see Mary and so to see the meaning of our bodily selves. Mary, mother of God, mother of faith, stands with us—stands beside us—confronted by God. For us, Mary witnesses to the fact that our flesh may serve as the vessel for God's life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

From the sanctuary of Mary's hospitality, Jesus came forth into the world.

It's not insignificant that Mary's an unknown. Her untried and unknown capacity to bear life, her creatureliness, her frightened awareness of the unspeakable powers of God: all lend themselves to Mary's flesh linking itself with ours. She is, without God, finally no one—of no account. She is one of us, a fully human being, fully undivine. Yet, from her flesh, God calls forth the only begotten of the Most High.

Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Flesh to flesh. It's all holy, isn't it? It's all holy and gracious and wonderful and mysterious and so beyond our human understanding.

It was all beyond Mary's understanding, too.

Was she scared? Did she think she was crazy? Did she want to walk away from it all?

How do you bear forth the life of God into the world? As with Mary, there's a cost involved, and that cost will try our flesh, not to mention our souls. The scandals in our communities, the infidelity of those bound to us, the grind of the world snagging and strangling our days: These are only the beginning of the cost. There may be too much for us to ponder, too much at stake; there will be swords to pierce our hearts, snooping shepherds and foreign kings. Perhaps we too will be exiles and refugees, misunderstood and abandoned by those we thought were friends. We may face rebuke, even rebuke from Christ; and always, always, always there will be the strangeness of nurturing what is unnatural and unfamiliar within our souls—within our very being.

"Let it be," Mary said, despite not knowing what the future would bring. "Let it be," Mary said, and her future was embraced by God's. "Let it be," Mary said, and she sang the first phrase of the Easter song of praise.

We've almost made it, haven't we? We're almost at the crèche, almost peering into the human face of God. We're almost stepping into all of the splendor and the mystery of the Christ Mass, aren't we?

We pause. We wait one more time. We hear the words of the angel this morning: "Hail! Don't be afraid. Don't ever be afraid. Something's coming. Something wonderful."

We pause. We wait one more time.

Amen. ...

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