

CALL WAITING

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, the period which extends from the Sunday nearest November 30th (St. Andrew's Day) and ends on Christmas Eve. Advent means 'coming' and, traditionally referred to the birth of Christ in the manger at Bethlehem. During the Middle Ages, however, the original meaning of the term 'Advent' was expanded to include reference to the Second Coming of Christ on the Day of Judgment, as well as to Christ's present coming to every believer through grace [The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed. (2000), 24].

This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel relates the story of the angel Gabriel's annunciation of the forthcoming birth of Christ to the blessed virgin Mary. The opening words, namely, "in the sixth month," provide a direct link to Luke's earlier account of the impending birth of John the Baptist to Mary's relative Elizabeth, who is now in her sixth month of pregnancy. The juxtaposition of the two stories is intended to underscore their similarities and differences.

The similarities consist of the following: (1) the angel Gabriel announces both births; (2) both pregnancies involve a miracle (Elizabeth was "barren" and "getting on in years," while Mary is an unmarried virgin); (3) both Zechariah (Elizabeth's husband) and Mary are startled by the angel's message; (4) both are told that their sons will be "great;" (5) both are commanded to call their sons by specific names (John and Jesus, respectively); and (6) Zechariah responds to the angel's annunciation by asking, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years," whereas Mary responds, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

There are essential differences, however: (1) Elizabeth's conception is in response to prayer, whereas Mary's conception results from God's initiative; (2) Zechariah is described as belonging "to the priestly order of Abijah" and Elizabeth, as being a "descendent of Aaron," whereas Mary is simply referred to as being "a virgin;" (3) the annunciation by the angel to Zechariah is made in the Temple, while that to Mary occurs in Nazareth, an unimportant village in Galilee; (4) because Zechariah did not believe the angel's words, he was rendered temporarily mute, whereas Mary, by declaring "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your will," submits to the will of God and offers herself to fulfill a purpose that is not her own; and (5) whereas Elizabeth bears Zechariah a natural son, Mary's son will be called the "Son of God."

Mary's calling by the angel Gabriel can be likened to the calling of Moses, Gideon, Isaiah and Jeremiah, all of whom questioned their qualification for the role they were called upon to play. Thus, Moses responded: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt" [Ex 3.11]. Similarly, Gideon, when commissioned to go and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian, responded: "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" [Judg 6.14-15]. Again, Isaiah, when he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, cried aloud: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" And, when the Lord declared to Jeremiah that he had appointed him a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah responded: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" [Jer 1.6]

Like those prophets, Mary is startled and wary when first confronted by the angel Gabriel. She is understandably perplexed by his salutation (“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”), and ponders “what sort of greeting this might be.” Gabriel’s message is indeed daunting: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...[who]...will be called the Son of the Most High,” who will be given “the throne of his ancestor David,” who will “reign over the house of Jacob forever,” and of whose “kingdom there will be no end.” Unlike those prophets, however, she does not evince fear or any unwillingness to assume her new role. Her concern is simply a practical one: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel’s explanation is even more fantastic than his initial pronouncement: “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 holy; he will be called Son of God.” Indeed, it is hard to think of anything to say other than – Jesus!

Gabriel’s disclosure that Mary’s relative Elizabeth has conceived, notwithstanding her advanced age and prior barrenness, while in a sense miraculous, serves to emphasize the difference in their situations. Mary’s call is likewise radically different from those received by Israel’s prophets, who with God’s help served to lead God’s people and to spread his Word. Mary’s call was to be and become a profoundly different person, no longer merely the wife of a village carpenter and the mother of her husband’s natural children, but the mother of the Son of God by action of the Holy Spirit. Her response – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to thy word”- foreshadows Christ’s words in the Garden, when he says “not my will but yours be done.” In the course of her conversation with the angel Gabriel, Mary “discovers who she is, what her destiny is to be, and how she will fulfill it. It is the triumph of the divine

vocation within her, not defeat but victory, not submission and resignation but willingness to discover how God could and would use her life in fulfillment of the divine plan of which she is so vital a part [Gomes, Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living].”

When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps with joy in response to Mary’s greeting. Elizabeth, who is filled with the Holy Spirit, then declares; “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” In response Mary delivers her song of praise (the “Magnificat”). Mary’s words of praise “speak of God’s redeeming work not as future but as already having been fulfilled....The overthrow of the powerful has not come about through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child.....The proud are scattered. The powerful are deposed. By contrast, the lowly are exalted and the hungry are fed while the rich are sent away empty...More than predictions of what is to come, the Magnificat praises God for the goodness of God’s nature and the redemption that Israel and the church have experienced.” [NIB IX, 55]

The First Coming of Christ, which we celebrate at Christmas, occurred two thousand years ago. We do not know when the promised Second Coming may occur. During this Advent Season, this time of watching and waiting, it would seem especially appropriate that we devote our thoughts and our prayers to the matter of Christ’s coming to us during the between times, that is, of his present coming to us through Grace. Christ came to us once. Christ will come to us once again at the end of time. But in the mean time, it is the Holy Spirit that “makes Christ present to believers – [who] re-presents Christ. The Spirit unites believers to Christ and thus spans the gap between the then and

there and the here and now....Christ is not merely a memory of someone long ago or someone who may arrive in the future; he is present here and now to us – in the power of the Spirit.” As the gift of the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit is “the power who teaches us what is the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5.5), empowers our new life in Christ (Rom. 8:11), and motivates and equips us for discipleship and service (Rom. 8.14.)” [Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, 171.]

God came to Moses, to Gideon, to Isaiah and Jeremiah, and to Mary. Each responded to his or her call with consequences that transformed their lives and those of all believers. During this Advent Season, this time of hope, let us open our hearts and minds to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. There is a call waiting for each of us. Let us listen and respond. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The Rev. David L. Fobes
Trinity Church
Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts
December 11, 2022