

December 21, 2008

**Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B** (Luke 1:26-38)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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It is the fourth Sunday of Advent, not Christmas yet. Everywhere we look, people are completing their preparations for Christmas Day. Schools are out, people are beginning to travel, and most people have their trees up. But it is not Christmas yet. It is still Advent, a time of preparation. We are preparing to celebrate the Incarnation, when God in Jesus broke through and acted in our time and space in order to begin God's saving plan for humankind. The last few weeks, our scripture has been giving us themes to ponder in our preparation. Keep awake! Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight; the Light is coming into the World. We are hearing, "Get ready for God to break into the world." The Incarnation and our need to prepare for it is a present reality.

Before I went off to seminary, a man in my office used to come and talk to me about religion. He was often agitated by the thought of the advance of faiths other than Christianity in America, in the world. One day he came into my office and said, "I was in a cab in New York and I got to talking with the cab driver who is not Christian. He told me he did not believe that Christianity is real because he did not believe that God would lower God's self to become a human being." In other words, this man rejected the idea of the incarnation altogether. My friend could not articulate any kind of response to this challenge. He was flustered.

The incarnation is not merely a problem for that particular cab driver; it is a problem for many human beings who are not Christian. In fact, it is a problem for many people who consider themselves Christian. The principal objection being, God would not bother with humanity, which is racked with depravity, violence and corruption. God is out there somewhere, separate and uninvolved, the clock maker who makes the clock, winds up and steps back. Maybe this option is preferable. If we minimize the reality of God in our world, then we can minimize our response.

However, if we look at the long history of God and God's people as revealed to us in scripture, we see a God who consistently breaks in to God's created world, in order to interact with humanity and bring God's people back into God's grace. Look at the track record. The Old Testament is an account of God's activity in the world. Its narratives point to a God who became involved in the lives of human beings in order to bring God's grace to them and in order to help raise up a faithful people who might collectively be a light to all nations, bringing the world to God and God's kingdom into the world. The incarnation follows along this pattern of the Old Testament. God breaks into our world out of love in order to begin God's saving plan. As in all cases of God's involvement, it requires human commitment. There is always a choice.

Today we hear about Mary and the Annunciation, where the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and makes God's plan known to her. Mary is probably a child by the standards of our society. She is not wealthy; she does not hold any position of authority. Yet she is given the opportunity to accept the special grace of becoming the mother of God's incarnate self.

Luke writes that Mary is perplexed. She is unnerved. What sane person wouldn't be? Mary's response is "How can this be?" Far from being some overly faithful zealot, even Mary knows how babies are made. "How can this be?" However, at the end of this revelation, Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." She is saying, "Amen, let it be so." That is her decision, her choice. She agrees to participate in God's plan for the world. It would be difficult for God to force an unplanned pregnancy on some unsuspecting woman and expect the plan to work. The Incarnation requires more than God breaking into the world, it requires human participation. God in humankind is half the incarnation. The other half requires humankind to be in Christ, to participate in God's action in the world.

The Church is the continuing act of the Incarnation, Christ in the world today. We participate in the Incarnation when we show up on Sunday, when we pray together and gather around the table together partaking in the body and blood of Christ, when we feed on Christ in our hearts with thanksgiving. We gather here and go forth into the world to make God's presence, God's light in the world a reality for believers and non-believers alike. Our actions, stemming from our faith, shape others and the world around us. Perhaps a Church more aware of itself as bearers of the light of Christ would allow others to be open to the idea of the incarnation.

I visited a young woman in the hospital some years ago. She was sick, but recovering. She and I were talking and she revealed that she had a son, less than two years old. This surprised me because she was young, only 21 years old. I learned that the father was not an active figure in their lives anymore. I asked her if she was involved in a faith community, and if so, shall I contact them for her. It turned out she belonged to a local church and I learned that they were very involved in her life and in her well-being. She began to well up as we talked and she said, "My church has been so supportive and so helpful, during my illness and in helping me with my son." I always feel at home there. I know I am going to be OK and I want my child to be raised in the church." She was crying because of the love she experienced through the church. That is an incarnation experience. That is God breaking into the world in the body of Christ. That is the body of Christ responding, helping to bring healing and reconciliation to a young mother, not condemnation or judgment, and a young mother responding to the body of Christ, welcoming that love and participating in it by raising her child in that body.

If we are paying attention to what is going on in our world, we see there are many stories like this. God is active in our lives, active in our stories. When

someone says I don't think God would lower God's self to become human, I see otherwise. I see a God who broke into time in Jesus Christ and continues to break into our lives today. It is the God of our history and our experience.

During Advent, we hear, "Keep awake! Prepare the way of the Lord; the Light is coming into the World." Our last gift in our Advent preparation is more than a reminder that the mystery of the incarnation requires a human response. We spend time preparing for the light in the world, so that when we are called to bear that light and bring reconciliation, we can say individually and collectively, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."