

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
24 December 2017

Scripture readings:

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Luke 1:46-55 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

As we contemplate the annunciation by the angel to Mary before she gave birth, before the Nativity, we also have this extraordinary text from 2 Samuel about Nathan and David and the urge to express masculine power, authority and empire by building God a church. It's funny that God can survive with these people wherever they went, and then it's time to establish empire.

You may know this about England, but there's a difference between a town and a city. Do you know what makes a city a city in England? They have a cathedral! So we know about church building in our own history.

I had an interesting conversation about *this* building this week with a woman who knew Ray. I said, "Well, we're making plans for refurbishing the outside and making it a little more historic." She said, "Oh, I love that church!" She didn't know you; she was talking about the building. She's historically interested so she might be interested in helping us do that. Well, that's fine. But there's a purpose, I believe, in having these juxtaposed texts about building a temple in Jerusalem for God to live in and Mary receiving this announcement from an angel that she was supposed to be the mother of Jesus. And then the Church works on that for a while and she's not only the mother of Jesus, but she's the mother of God! How does that stick in your Protestant craw? And then she's a virgin mother of God who's supposed to be a human.

By the way, when I watched the pope this morning I didn't turn the tv off immediately and I have learned that if you wait just another day or two, the bargains will be better! *[laughter]* If you go to the box stores, the large screen tvs that have been returned and are still in full working order will be a *fraction* of the price. *[laughter]* Now we're talking Christmas!

That's why it's important for us to observe Advent. Something is happening. And let me say this at the get-go - and I mean this sincerely - all of the people who are missing the point (of course we're not. We're special. We're wonderful. We're religious and we're superior!) All of the people who are missing the point are the people for whom Jesus comes. Maybe *especially* because they're missing the point. But we as religious people are going to appropriate this annunciation to Mary and all of this stuff that we work so hard at remembering as we trot out the 4th century creed which we'll get to in short order, it's worth pausing to think what this annunciation means. What is this all about?

Well, I think we're all sophisticated and intelligent enough to know that all of the birth narrative stuff that comes to us in the gospel is probably later editions. As the Church starts to believe things about the effectiveness, life and death and ministry of Jesus, they start to get these ideas that he was so special that he was God, and everybody then knew that if somebody was God there had to be special things that happened when he was born. So we start to get things like stars. And not just those who don't know coming to where he was born - the shepherds, what do they know? They were dumb shepherds, right? Farmers know nothing. Ha ha ha!

And those who know what they don't know, those were wise men. All of these people with or without knowledge coming and a woman giving birth without having had sex. Now the Church isn't going to deny Mary a vagina, a birth canal or fallopian tubes or any of that, but they are going to say she has no sex to get there. I mean that's nuts, but it becomes a part of the tradition in an effort to say this guy was special. This *Jewish* guy was special. Now keep that in mind when you get to Easter and they said the Jews killed Jesus.

You know we, in our 21st century ignorance, like to make Mary into an Italian Catholic who was a virgin. *[laughter]* Get it? So let's be honest about the tradition. The tradition is there to inform us that people came to believe something special about Jesus and what he said and how he lived and a part of understanding how special that was, which came to be believed and shared... Anybody ever hear of Santa Claus? Now the thing about Santa Claus is when you grow up you stop believing. Maybe the thing about Christmas and the

tradition and the proclamation of the Church is when we grow up we start believing in a God who is larger than everything we know who creates us and, for reasons we do not know but firmly believe and teach and confess, a God who chooses to live with us even in the hell of K-Mart or Target or forgetfulness or the urgency to have a cheap bargain at the end of December and beginning of January, a God who was born so low that we first encounter that God - in the tradition - on the shitty floor of a stable.

Cardinal Dolan was on tv this morning, talking about when he was together with his brother bishops and they were trying to decide what the most important verse in the Bible was. Well, that's not a bad job for bishops. They should do it more often. So should we perhaps. One of his colleagues came up with this - and it's not a bad one - "*And she wrapped him in swaddling clothes.*" Do you know what that means? That means Jesus wore a diaper. Yeah, real humanity! And you know what's in a diaper; it's the same thing on the barn floor.

And the tradition is there to remind us that a human being, and a Jew at that, believed and lived to believe what was world-changing and did so in a fashion that was so upsetting that it cost him his life because he took on the entire religious, political, economic and social system of his day and said, "*If you think that's what God is about, you're sorely mistaken.*" And *this* is what God is about, and he visited the whore and he healed the leper and he was with the addicted and those in need. He saw value in the widow and the orphan, and he was with the people in Walmart and K-Mart and Target who weren't getting it.

That's why we call this Jesus *Emmanuel*, God with us! Not with *us*, but with *all* of us - good, bad or indifferent, man, woman or trans, whatever! What we celebrate at Christmas is a belief that in the beginning God creates the whole shootin' match and until our last breath, God loves us and every other louse in Creation!

So what does that do to your hypocritical self-righteousness? God *does* wish to build a temple, and he will build it out of your bowels, your small intestine, your large intestine, your stomach, your heart, your lungs, your hands, your mind, your brain, your eyes, your ears, your tongue, your lips - all of that stuff that you see in the mirror when you step out of the shower, that ridiculous sack of flesh which is God's temple. Now *that* is what we believe. That's where the myth and the mystery should take us, to the substantial reality of ourselves and our place in the world as those who are beloved by God and who believe that everybody else is, too.

What David and Nathan were trying to do is say, "*We are people who are beloved by God and others are not, so we will build a temple out of something other than flesh which will express empire, power, ecclesiastical authority.*" And that's nowhere where Jesus was.

So we, as people who gather here when the rest of the world may be elsewhere, believe that God can use us, all of our situations in life notwithstanding - even our different ideas (although yours are wrong and mine are right - that was a joke!) - that God can use all of us in our own situations and conditions in life whatever our age, gender, health...to be present in the world. And that may be in as little bit of an encounter as it is for a grandpa to hold and cuddle a grandchild.

Fulton Sheen said this morning, "*God doesn't want us to become nice.*" Wow, that sounds bad, doesn't it? No, God wants us to become *new creatures*. Nice people are doing what they're supposed to. New creatures are doing what they *are*.

So I'm grateful for this opportunity to pause for a moment before we get to all the hoopla and the Rockabye Jesus tonight and all the rest of that "lovely" stuff. And it will be beautiful, and there is a time to celebrate the Nativity which is what Christmas is - the birth of a Jew 2,000 years ago who lived and died as one of us, who on the 8th day was circumcised. Now, how's that for having one of those with having a mother who didn't have sex? Do you want to know something scientific? A virgin birth is a scientific possibility among humans if theoretically you take a woman's ovum and excite it to divide. You could theoretically get a child but it would always be a haploid female, a female with half the number of genes and chromosomes.

So Jesus being a man is either a miracle or not. And who cares? Because not a single person in this room got here without somebody else having had sex. The example for us is to believe that we can live and die as Jesus lived and died.

And now if you'll give me permission for just a little bit of a sidebar - If I were with Lutherans today, I would be having a heck of a good time because Lutherans since the time of the Reformation I think have

short-changed Mary. Yes, in the Middle Ages there was no emphasis on Mary and Mariolatry and all the rest of it, but Bible-thumping Lutherans who stand on the Word of God and sometimes that alone, forget that she's in there. A too-young Jewish virgin - well, she must have been a virgin at some point, before or after - who cares? But you will look hard to find five Lutheran churches in this country named St. Mary's.

And why do I make the point? Because if in the tradition that we pay attention to, if we're going to allow Jesus to be God's son in a way that we somehow think we are not ... I think that's a problematic idea ... we can at least keep Mary as a human being, fully functional, fully plumbed female, cycling female who gets pregnant and bears a child in this world and in flesh as an example for ourselves, men and women. Why? Because today in the scripture she is visited by an angel. God pays her a special, long-distance personal phone call, telegraph visit ... and makes the most ridiculous proposition. God asks her whether or not he can curl up inside of her and live in her body and through her body - not her spirit, not her mind, not her emotions (you know women and their emotions and all that stuff) through her full, complete, cycled, aging body. May I curl up inside of you and live in the world through you? And she says *Yes*.

Now that's what's important to me - that we remember today that a human being, a too-young Jewish female 2,000 years ago feels that it's ok - although she doesn't understand the circumstances and consequences or any of the rest of it, and her heart will be broken and we'll get to that on the second of February when we remember the presentation in the temple. It will break her heart but nonetheless she says, "*Yes, be it done to me according to your will.*" If there is anything we take away from today, I invite you to believe that that might be a daily prayer for you.

Years ago in my first parish I came to know a man who became a friend and a parishioner. He had lost a child to leukemia. Years later he lost a grandchild to another deadly disease. We would often spend an evening and empty a large bottle of wine together and talk about these things. It was he who gave me my daily prayer, and this is it, and it's very close to Mary's: "*Thy will be done - nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.*" And if we can get there, the world will know that God is present in and through you and us and all who celebrate Christmas as Emmanuel, God with us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.