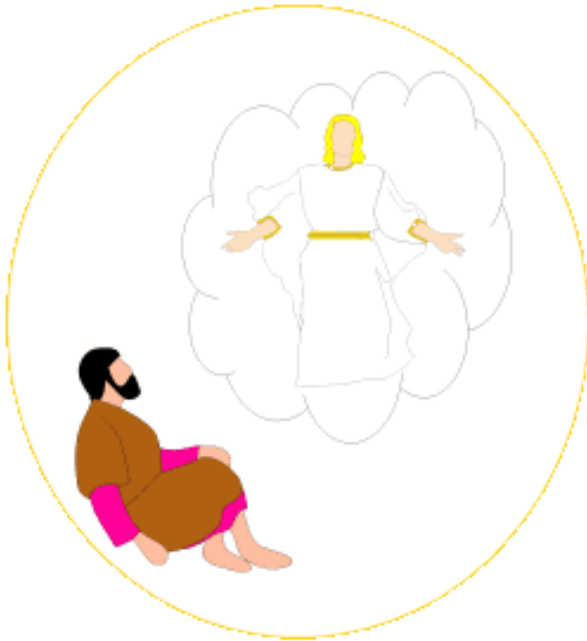


The Fourth Sunday in Advent (Year A)

December 23, 2007

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Can you picture the angel Gabriel and the Annunciation to Mary? Of course you can, anybody can. You may even get that image on a Christmas card this year. I just completed teaching a course on Angels and Demons and I think have seen enough of that image to last me the remainder of my life.



But. Have you ever seen a painting or any other image of the angel announcing the news to Joseph, as in today's Gospel?

Chances are you have not.

I have found it only in a cartoon on an evangelical Christmas site. I don't know that any great painter painted it.

But as Dom Crossan points out in his brand new book about Christmas, it would be a good subject for a painting: a mysterious angel in a dream in the darkness of night visits Joseph and tells him the news. It could be a diptych with the Annunciation to Mary.

But it never is. It just exists in words.

We hear it today as we close the season of Advent. It's part of the Christmas story—the Christmas story from Joseph's point of view.

And it has something to teach. But not by giving us information about the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. It wasn't written for people who didn't have that information. It was written for people like you: who already know the story. But can learn more.

How? By raising questions. The Bible often does that, you know. I like its questions better than its answers, actually.

This Christmas story—Christmas according to Matthew, Christmas through the eye of Joseph—makes me ask 3 questions. 1. Why did the angel wait until Mary was “with child” to tell him? Why not prepare him beforehand, like Mary—or for that matter why doesn't Mary herself tell him when she heard the news? 2. The prophecy says his name is going to be Emmanuel. Why then does Joseph name him Jesus? That makes no sense, or does it? and 3. We heard the reading from Isaiah. A young woman will give birth. No miracle there, young women give birth every day. But the Gospel makes it “a Virgin” will give birth. That does not happen every day,

and some people have said it has never happened on any day. Why does Matthew change the word?

First, the easiest one: what **about** that Annunciation? Why didn't **Mary** tell him, since she found out first? That is easy: which would Joseph be more likely, under the circumstances, to believe—Mary or an Angel of the Lord? As the splendid actor Nathan Lane once said, you do the math here and see what you come up with.

More intriguing is the second part—why doesn't God inform Joseph, as he does Mary, beforehand? For that matter, why didn't God send the Angel to them both, at the same time? Wouldn't that be more fair? More gentle? More kind?

Yes. It would. But this is not what this is about. Unlike Mary, Joseph is given no choice. Mary can say yes or no.

Joseph has no choice but to live with this. And live with it he does. Wonderfully.

And this is a sign that things are different. That a New Covenant is at hand. Here's what I mean. Everybody knows that the world was Patriarchal. The first stroke of the New Covenant was to give enormous power to the woman, and ask the man to abdicate his traditional position of dominance and ownership and authority. To make room for God.

Just as Mary passed the test when she agreed, so does Joseph—he handles it all with grace and dignity. There is no one like him thus far. He is the first nontraditional male. I seriously think that Joseph ought to be the patron male saint for the great women's liberation movement which happened in our lifetimes and made our lives so much better. I believe Joseph is an outstanding role model—not of the obedient man so much but of the man secure enough to honor the power of the woman and the power of God. To step aside for the Holy Spirit.

Now, what about that word? Virgin. Why in your printout insert does Isaiah say *young woman* where the Gospel says *Virgin*? Well a few of us thought about this in adult ed last week. We found one answer: because most people in Jesus' day used the new Greek version of the Bible, and in it, Isaiah says “virgin.”

But that begs the question. It doesn't really answer it. Why did the Greek Bible make the change?

The Orthodox Church teaches that that's because their translation is an improvement over the Hebrew. But we don't teach that. We respect the Hebrew text too much for that.

Here I think the sceptics and the blind faith people are both missing the Good News. If you say well that is impossible you have not been listening to Modern Science.

What?

You heard me. The great scientists learned never say never. They never say “this can never happen.” They say, as far as can be determined at our present state of knowledge.” They do not say here are the facts. They say “here is our current model.” And they don’t say “we know” X or Y. They say “our current position is this.”

That’s one of the things I mean when I say modern science—or rather recent science—supports the faith like never before.

But notice this too. Our miracles are modest miracles. I mean NT miracles, of course. Trumpet tongued secrets said Ignatius and I think this is what he means. They are never earth-ringing shattering spectaculars. Walking on water. Feeding lots of people. Curing various common diseases. Ejecting a few low-grade demons. You’re not supposed to just swallow them. You’re supposed to wrestle with them. The New Israel, that’s us, and we wrestle with God. But like Jacob we can prevail. I mean, we can say, I believe this one or that one.

Compare this with the Mahayana stories of Buddha’s birth and you’ll get what I mean. The Virgin Birth is modest. Very quiet too: who knew at the moment? And it’s just the sort of thing a rationalist has to stretch just a little to admit.

I do take it on faith. I can’t prove what’s going on this week and I wouldn’t want to. But I will say this: a virgin birth seems a lot less weird to me than a world where light bends in circles and time is a curve and solid things and energy are the same thing really—but that’s the world we are given by the great minds.

Now what about that name? Why, if the prediction was **Emmanuel**, does the adoptive father Joseph call him **Jesus**?

Well, the simplest answer is, the prophecy is not about predicting things in the far future, it was about events that were happening when the prophet was alive. And he was giving strange names to prophetic children. “God is with us” is one of those names, or titles. On that level it has nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. He gets the popular Hebrew name Joshua in its local version. Joshua was a great warrior and trail-blazer and that is exactly what the new Joshua would be on a different level.

But obviously our Church has made the connection. That’s why we read them both. When the Revised Standard Bible first came out some Christians burned it because it made the change to *young woman*. This is more honest: we hear what the original really says, then we listen to the Gospel.

Here’s another answer. The name Jesus means God saves, God recues. It’s therefore Emmanuel plus. It implies God is with us: not just with us in the sense of among us but with us in the sense of “are you with us?”

And here is a third. It makes us look at the name. Names in the old world were always predictive—little prophecies, not just labels like our names usually are. And Jesus means God sets us free.

Free from what? Well, start by asking what you would like to be free from. Granted the wish. Debt? Sickness? Fear? Inflation? Global warming? Some unhealthy relationship? An oppressive job? White Noise? Junk mail? Germs? Corrupt politicians? Television? Racism? Greed?

In a way the Good News says All of the Above. All of these are caused says Augustine by one thing and one thing only and that is sin. And the News is, he is Jesus because he will set us free from our sins.

Free from our sins. Usually this is taken to mean “from the results of our sins.” In other words, from the sins we have done, we are forgiven.

That is no doubt true and very strengthening to hear. To stop there though is to underestimate what this Good News claims. What it really says is something even stronger.

Free from sin. Not the guilt or the consequences: free from sin. What would that be like? Not forgiven any sins you might commit but free from sin period. A sin-free existence. Think about it.

Most people think perfect freedom would be no rules to follow so they could sin right and left with impunity. And that sounds great but it’s absolutely backwards. Real freedom is not freedom from the rules but freedom from the weakness.

To be forgiven is wonderful and of course God does this. But Jesus goes one better. He sets us free from sin itself.

Think about it. To be free from sin’s chains. To be smart and strong enough to say no whenever we have the opportunity to do selfish things. And to say it with a smile. And to say it not just for the letter but for the spirit of the law. Not only so we don’t steal and murder and lie viciously. So we don’t curse our neighbor or lust with disrespect or covet the junk our culture throws our way. I think that’s what we should be taking from the name *Jesus*. He saves us from our sins and that is the greatest liberation in this world. I want that. One day I believe I shall claim it.

Look at the Catechism. Freedom from sin would look like this. Living up to our Baptism. Being as Gregory of Nyssa says not just an image of God but a mirror for God. Reclaiming the likeness so God is reflected in our lives.

That’s what Matthew gives us in the Gospel today. What a vision. What a promise. What a gift. I seriously think all the beauty and warmth of this season—which is real as rain, it’s right there along with the tinsel and commerce—has to do with the hope of that vision coming into our world.