



SAINT LUKE'S

ADVENT 4
YEAR B

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16
ROMANS 16:25-27
LUKE 1:26-38
PSALM 89:1-4, 19-26

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

DECEMBER 24, 2017

Today is, as you may have noticed, simultaneously the fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve, an event whose appearance roughly every 6 years clergy begin to rue far in advance. I regret this cycle in some ways, not only for the busy schedule it creates, but because the fourth Sunday of Advent is cut short, barely given time to exist in our minds and on our calendar before Christmastide bursts forth, cutting short our period of waiting and hoping with all of its radiant resplendence. The readings for today begin do this no matter when the fourth Sunday of Advent falls; we have clearly shifted tone, moving from enigmatic warning parables by Jesus, calling us to be alert for the coming of the Bridgeroom, to Luke's narrative of the Annunciation.

But I want to guard the short period of time we have for the fourth Sunday of Advent. I'll ask you to remain with me in the liminal space that Advent can be, a time of not knowing, a time of straining to see the first glimmers of dawn.

I ask you to consciously choose to pause before Christmas comes onto the scene, to spend just a bit more time readying your heart for the coming of Christ, both in the manger and someday in the clouds with great glory.

If you have been at any of the daily masses this week, you'll have heard me share my personal struggle with the season of Advent, one which forces me to affirm and explore the notion of Christ's return, the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, in very concrete terms. I'll admit, the return of Christ is a doctrine with which I have a very complicated

history. I was raised in a fundamentalist evangelical home which believed in a pre-tribulational rapture and an earthly millennial kingdom. If none of these terms make sense to you, consider yourself fortunate. This model of the ‘end times’ had a very complicated timeline which began with the rapture, triggering very specific future events “explicitly foretold” in the Revelation to John and a smattering of Hebrew prophets, usually cherry picked from the historical context and nebulously tacked on to current events which might approximate the rise of the Antichrist, the establishing of a nefarious one world order, precursors to the mark of the beast, and the great battle of Armageddon.

As I moved away from this model, though, I found that over time I had swung too far to the other end of the pendulum. Instead of charting the days and being on the lookout for members of Satan’s beastly band, I found that I had relegated the return of Christ in glory to some unspecified year on the calendar, so far in the future that it had lost all sense of urgency or meaning.

The doctrine of the return of Christ and the dawning of the kingdom of Heaven had simply become an emblem of a hope that one day all things would be set aright, and while this is certainly a piece of the puzzle, it possesses none of the pressing urgency or the need for vigilance which Jesus has emphasized so clearly in our gospel passages these last few weeks. I had tamed the doctrine to a point of irrelevance.

I find a middle way forward between these two extremes in the person and response of Mary, clearly exemplified in the narrative of the Annunciation before us today. The Incarnation of Christ, the first banners of the Kingdom of God erected, if you will, was less of a definitive endpoint at the end of a linear timeline than it was an in-breaking of Light into a period of darkness. Fr William reminded us in a recent homily on John the Baptizer that, before this point, the people of Israel had existed in a state of relative silence in their relationship with God; it had been hundreds of years between the last of the Hebrew prophets and the arrival of John.

“Then came”, in the words of TS Eliot, “at a predetermined moment,
 a moment in time and of time,
 a moment not out of time, but in time,
 in what we call history:
 transecting, bisecting the world of time,
 a moment in time but not like a moment of time,
 A moment in time but time was made through that moment:
 For without the meaning there is no time,
 And that moment of time gave the meaning.” (*Choruses from the Rock*,
 VII)

In the midst of this history-bisecting moment, we find Mary, faced with an incomprehensible announcement: The Eternal God, above and beyond all time, would choose to enter the narrative of history through her. “And now you will conceive in your womb and

bear a son, and you will name him Jesus...He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (vv. 31, 33). Mary is presented with the call to both physically and spiritually bear Christ to the world, to offer herself in service to the grand plan of God’s far-reaching work of redemption, and to tangibly participate in this work.

In my process of formation for the priesthood, I took Mary’s role in bearing Christ as a blueprint for how I too would be called to offer the presence of Christ sacramentally and spiritually in my own life. This opportunity, though, is not the work of clergy alone, but is our shared purpose as individual members of Christ’s church. To be a Christian is to be ‘a little Christ’, an ambassador and herald of Christ’s presence in the world.

It is this understanding which has helped reshape how I think of the coming of the kingdom of God and the return of Christ to the world. Jesus himself tells us this later in Luke’s gospel. “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is **within** you.” (17:20-21)

The return of Jesus I hope for is neither a perilously imminent apocalypse nor a benign aspiration set beyond the foggy mists of the future. It is a “a moment in time but not like a moment of time”, not

the endpoint of a linear timeline, but a perpetual in-breaking dawn in our hearts, always on the cusp of realization, always seeking to dispel a deeper darkness. In this way it remains imminent, and we must always be ready to answer, like Mary, ““Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (v. 38). Our readiness begins with an assent like Mary’s. We must remain vigilant and willing to discern where Christ seeks to be present in our world and we must then be willing to bear his presence in our lives. We will not, I’ll wager, have the luxury of a divine announcement borne by an archangel, but the call to us is no less clear.

The fullness of the meaning of the Incarnation is that the entire created world, from the stars and the planets to our office cubicles and neighborhoods, matters in the work of God’s redemption. This knowledge grants us immense freedom as we seek to serve as heralds of the kingdom, presenting us with almost countless opportunities in our daily lives to serve as Christ-bearers like Mary. All that is needed from us are eyes to see the need before us and our willing assent to partake in the work.

And in this way, each moment of time we choose to bear Christ into gives the meaning, and the kingdom of God dawns a bit brighter in our hearts.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

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