

Sermon  
Advent 4-B  
St. Andrew's, Methuen  
December 20, 2020  
William Bradbury

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16  
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26  
Romans 16:25-27  
Luke 1:26-38

One Christmas Eve back in the 1960s my home church in Atlanta was using readings from a contemporary translation of the Bible to replace those from the King James Bible.

I'll never forget when my traditionalist Father got home from church and with shock and horror said: "Well, I've heard it all now: "Mary is no longer 'Great with child'. Now she's "obviously pregnant!"

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I have some sympathy with my Father's desire for beautiful language, but **the deeper issue here is not how we talk about Mary's pregnancy, but how we understand the nature of the child she is bearing and what that means for us.**

Today's gospel reading of "the annunciation", celebrated by the Church on March 25<sup>th</sup>, exactly 9 months before December 25, helps us answer that question, by putting before us an essential issue of our faith, which is, **When did God get involved in the life of Jesus of Nazareth?**

In the first centuries after the crucifixion and resurrection, there were Christians giving competing answers to that question.

One group said, "God doesn't get involved with Jesus until his baptism. At that moment God adopts Jesus as God's son. This view is called adoptionism—God adopts Jesus at the Jordan River when Jesus is 30 years old. Therefore, there is no need for a Christmas story, because God isn't involved with Jesus's conception.

This view has always had a strong appeal to most of us who see life through the eyes of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, in which God is far off in heaven and uninvolved with life on this planet. There is no room for mystery and the power of God.

If something doesn't fit the worldview of my five senses, then it can never happen and I'm not going to believe it did. It's okay to let the kids have their Christmas pageant, because they'll outgrow it soon enough.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the view which won the day and is found in our Gospel reading. A young teen named Mary has a visitation from an angel saying to her: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.... For 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."

The Gospel of John puts Luke's story into philosophical language: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

In John's view, from before time God plans to come among us in Jesus and therefore there has never been a time God isn't involved in all of creation and especially in the conception, life, death, resurrection of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, "God with us."

**The Word of God which speaks creation into existence in the Book of Genesis, speaks Jesus into existence in the Gospels.**

**When did God get involved in the life of Jesus of Nazareth? From before time and forever because God love us and actively works inside creation to bring us into the full awareness of our union with God inside the Divine Love.**

**If you have no problem believing God speaks creation into existence, there is no logical reason God couldn't speak Jesus into existence. But to get distracted by the issue of how God is involved with the conception of Jesus is to miss the deeper point being made.**

Though Luke and John (and Matthew) tell the story of Jesus's origin in different ways, they agree that Mary's child is not the result of a random colliding of blind atoms, molecules and cells, but the result of the loving intention of God.

**While we can't fully comprehend this mystery, we can love this mystery. So every Christmas we decorate our homes and light our candles that pierce the darkness of our lives, celebrating the loving intention and attention of God in sending Jesus among us.**

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Unfortunately too many Christians stop here and therefore miss the stunning fact that the mystery includes not just the mystery of creation and the mystery of the annunciation and incarnation, but it also includes the mystery of our union with God in Christ.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church this union is called "theosis", in which our finite humanity is fully joined with infinite God.

As Saint Cyril of Alexandria put it in the 5<sup>th</sup> century: "We are made partakers of the divine nature and are said to be sons [and daughters] of God. . . not only because we are exalted by grace to supernatural glory, but also **because we have God dwelling in us.**"

Notice how John's gospel describes your salvation and mine:

"But to all who received the Word, who believed in his name, God gave power to become children of God, **who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.**"

**Do you see it?**

We, like Jesus, "are born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man....**We are born of God.**"

This is your truest nature, your deepest self: God is your Father-Mother. My father and mother are not just John and Polly Bradbury, but Father-Mother God. This is why Genesis says human beings are born in the likeness and image of God.

**But of course, we don't believe it!**

**It's hard enough believing it about Jesus.** We may explore our genealogy, and even send in our DNA to see what countries we have living in us. But the reality is that we go back further than our DNA—**all the way back to the loving intention of God.**

**And as a friend of mine said years ago, "God's joy is not complete until our rear end is happily sitting in the lap of our Heavenly Father."**

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**Jesus is not Superman from the Planet Krypton, with superhuman powers.**

**Jesus is Son of God, Son of Man, and Son of Mary, sent by the loving intention of God to bring us into his experience of God, what he calls the Realm of God, so we too might wake up to and know our true nature in God.**

As Father Richard Rohr puts it, "We believe it in Jesus, so we can believe it in ourselves." It's what the Apostle Paul means when he says, "He no longer lives but Christ lives in him". See Galatians 2:20

Mary today is our example of how we are to respond to this profound mystery: She says, "**Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**" For Mary was not just obviously pregnant or

"great with child", Mary is part of God's eternal plan for the salvation, the "theosis", of us all.