

Advent IV – December 24

Come quickly, prays the prayer for today. Christmas cannot get here any quicker! It starts tonight!

The Gospel reading remind us of the events which transpire immediately before the birth of our Lord and the other readings remind us of the ancient promises which are fulfilled in that birth. We get the feeling from today's readings that we are on the cusp of something significant, a moment for which the world has waited a very long time and that this is the moment. For the children in your parish who are eyeing presents under the tree, these next few days crawl by. For the parents who can only see how much they have to do before the day arrives, it probably feels much like the days are hurtling past us in some sort of hyperdrive. (No, I don't have all my shopping done yet, can you tell?)

What does Advent have to say to us today? Are we even able to hear it with our eyes fixed on the festival which falls in just a few days of our reading this, and just hours after we preach this sermon?

The anticipation of an event which is about to happen can skew our reality so much that we start to do some things which are odd. This is what the salesman who puts pressure on us to buy because the deal won't be here by tomorrow is really doing to us. He is trying to affect our judgment, to put a pressure on us to think that we have to act now or it will be too late and we will be regretting our inaction tomorrow. How many cars or appliances are not sold that way? How many Christmas gifts won't be purchased in the coming days under pressure? High pressured anticipation can lead us to foolish things.

But anticipation is also something good. It can heighten our senses and awareness of what is happening right now. The child who is focused on those presents under the tree may be a better guide for us than the adults who are spending too much or who are feeling pressured to get it all done before the day arrives. The anticipation of the Christian is much more like waiting to unwrap a gift which is already there than the anxiety of the unprepared. The preparation belongs to God, he has carefully made the world ready for the day of Jesus' birth in a manger and he is carefully making sure that all is ready for the day of his second revelation. We have our eyes fixed on the author and perfecter of our faith, the gift from on high. Wrapped today in the Gospels and the preaching of God's people, wrapped in a chalice and the water of a font, one day we will see him as he is, for we shall be like him in all the ways that really matter to us and to him.

How will we as preachers turn the negative stress of the season to the joyful anticipation? The Epistle reading for last week might be a good launching point for this sort of a discussion. In the last chapter of I Thessalonians Paul told us that Jesus will do it. He is the one who makes Christmas into the celebration, not whether I have lived up to the Martha Stewart ideal. The only way to deal with the negative, however, is to replace it, displace it with Jesus.

It will a little difficult for the preacher to be heard today, if he even gets the chance to preach. After all, many Sunday Schools will be presenting the Christmas story this fourth Sunday of Advent and even if you are not surrounded by your Sunday School children on Sunday morning, you might find the congregants a little distracted.

What is one to do with that? Perhaps we could get defensive about it, but don't. See it as an opportunity to inject the Gospel into this joyous time. Let your people know that God delights in their happiness too, just as much as he does in their repentance and sorrow over their sins. It doesn't have to be profound and the sermon probably doesn't have to carry the day on this occasion, but remember the Spirit works through your words and he is subtle and flexible. He will make this all work for the blessings of those who love Jesus. You preach the word in season and out of season, even in the Christmas season and he will take of the rest.

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Today we are asking God to come to us. There is no problem or bad weather that will keep God from your familial celebration. What is more, he will also be with those folks who for whatever reason cannot be there with you on that day. In this way he ties the families together. He loves to celebrate this joyous day with you. I think we need to be upfront with this element. We need to tell our folks not to hesitate to invite guests to be part of the Christmas celebration at church this year.

The preacher might also make that something of a sermon theme. Families are often messy things – the uncle who drinks too much, the cousins going through the divorce and pitting their kids against each other. There are lots of ways that God can bring a measure of grace and mercy to those situations. The sin which weighs us down and is lifted from our shoulders might be the sin in the narrow sense and the wider sense – corporate sins, sins of the human condition, and the personal or narrower sense of sin, the sin which I own and whose burden I feel.

We ask God once again to stir up his power and help us by his might. The sins weigh us down and we need this speedy remedy. At least that is what the prayer asserts. The typical congregant might need to have his or her eyes opened to the weight of those sins. But perhaps the more likely task for the preacher will simply be to connect the weight they are already feeling to the word "sin" in this prayer. Is it a sin to be worried about the economy right now? I suppose if your greatest fear is that your dream of a 50" HDTV curved screen television will be downsized, it might be a bit of greed on your part. But for a lot of folks it will much more significant than that. Losing one's job, watching your retirement saving evaporate, watching the government make painful cuts in social services or even counting the offerings at church might be occasions for real concerns among your parishioners. This fear and this worry is not a moral problem, but it

certainly is part of the broken condition of this world which has been wrought by sin. Adam and Eve in the garden did not have economic downturns until they tried to be like gods. It is the bitter fruit of a skewed relationship with God, the world and one another.

We thought there were many sins which weighed us down. Most are not burdened by a sense of being “naughty” but sin has a way of loading us up. Guilt, yes, but also depression, fear, anxiety, and much more. Broken families – Christmas is often a family time. For those whose families have been ruptured, this can really weigh heavily upon us. Many will feel a burden if their children are not attending church. Perhaps this night they will join us. But we realize that they will not likely come next Sunday. Do we beat ourselves up about that? Should we?

The sins which God mightily lifts from our bent backs, are lifted not only by his great might, but also in mercy and grace. God is not up in heaven snorting derisively at all of us who invested in an inflated housing market and suggesting that it simply serves us right. God is gracious and merciful, that means he does not stop loving even foolish and stubbornly greedy people. He does not count our sins when he considers his gift to us. That economy of merit and deserve is absent from his equation. If anything, it works in a strange and almost perverse up-side-down sort of logic: the greater the need, the greater the gift and the more miserable the sinner, the more merciful the forgiveness.

While all of our Christmas gifts are best when they mirror that graciousness of God, let’s face it, we keep making that dreadful calculation when we give. It is simply part of our broken human nature. The sinner today will be confronted by the reality of God’s gracious gift given to undeserving people and through unlikely means. David is a political scoundrel sometimes. Mary is a peasant girl. Paul writes to Christians in Rome who may or may not have been riven by a Jewish and Gentile conflict. You preach this day to sinners and you read these texts yourself as a sinner, and to all of us God has a message and a proclamation of mercy and grace.

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, ² the king said to Nathan the prophet, “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.” ³ And Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you.”

⁴ But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, ⁵ “Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in?’ ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. ⁷ In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”” ⁸ Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the

sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹ And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² *When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.* ¹³ *He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.* ¹⁴ *I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men,* ¹⁵ *but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.* ¹⁶ *And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”* ¹⁷ *In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.*

This passage is one of the most significant sections of the history of God’s people. The promise made to David here will be pivotal for Jewish history. Spoken some 1000 years before his birth, the New Testament clearly understands this to be a promise of Jesus, the son of Mary whose birth we celebrate on December 25. God’s Word reveals that he has been planning for the redemption of the world for a very long time. The Gospels writers are particularly adamant about pointing out Jesus’ connection to David, but it appears that early Christians everywhere were interested in this aspect of Jesus. Paul appears to be quoting a song which the Roman congregation was singing about the Davidic root of Jesus in the prologue of Romans 1.

The philologist in me is delighted by the use of the Hebrew word for house within these verses. Hebrew was a language that did not have a great wealth of vocabulary, a fact which the Biblical authors often used for their advantage. The Hebrew thesaurus is a very thin little book. The Hebrew reader seemed to love puns, even some really bad ones. Most of the names of the tribes of Israel are in fact bad puns made by Leah and Rachel as their many sons are born to Jacob.

Here, the word house gets used in three different ways but because English has such diversity of vocabulary it doesn’t come out quite so clearly. David builds for himself a palace, a house, (written “beth” it actually is pronounced more like ‘bait’ with an ‘h’ sound tacked on the end.) He then notices that God’s ark is still in the tabernacle/tent which Moses made and which presumably is getting a little run down after some centuries of use and occasional neglect. So he proposes to build a Temple, but this is also the same word: beth or house. At first the prophet encourages David, but then, after a vision, God says that David has to wait. It will be his son, not David, who will build this house for God’s name.

But, God likes it that David had this in mind, so much so that he promises David to build his family into a dynasty, which is, wouldn't you know it, the same Hebrew word again: Beth or a house as in the house of Windsor or something like that.

Have you been keeping track. The same Hebrew word "House" is used for the king's palace, a temple, and a dynasty.

What is really interesting is how this then develops. When you read Solomon's comments and prayers in the dedication of the Temple, it is clear that he sees himself and the Temple as the fulfillment of that promise made to his father, David. And indeed, the house of David would rule for a phenomenal 400 years on the throne of Zion, a dynastic tenure which is virtually unheard of in the ancient world where kings were replaced like light bulbs in most countries.

But the NT takes this and tweaks it. In Ephesians 2, where Paul speaks of the Jews and the Gentiles coming together into one household, Paul says that Jesus has built a house upon the foundation of apostles and prophets (New and Old Testaments) and the people are the stones of the house and the Spirit of God dwells within it. Clearly he is thinking of this promise made to David about a Son who builds a house.

Most interpreters call the process "proleptic" which is the technical term for a prophecy that gets fulfilled and then gets "fuller-filled" in the NT. We see this in God freeing his people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt which is then fuller-filled in the cross when Jesus frees us from the slavery to sin. This sometimes gets fullest-filled in the discussion of the last things, when we will be freed from slavery to death. John sees a new Jerusalem descending from heaven with Jesus at the center of it, the new house of God, in which there is no Temple because God fills the whole thing.

Another way to think about this is as a "second narrative." Have you ever read a mystery story? The investigator stumbles around, follows false leads, makes a few miscalculations, etc., but at the end of the story he figures it out. Usually in the last chapter he sits the group down and explains exactly what happened. The girl who was running away from the crime scene was not guilty because... This retelling of the whole event is called a second narrative. It is not a new story, but it is a telling of the story which clears up many loose ends and clarifies the whole book. In many respects, the Jesus story is a second narrative for the whole OT. We might have wondered about Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac, the lamb slaughtered in the Passover story, David defeating Goliath, and much more. How do these stories all fit together? But then Jesus comes along and gathers up all the loose ends. He is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. He is the son of David who builds the house. He is the one who opens the eyes of the blind and lets the lame leap for joy. If you just have the OT, this is not always clear. In this way the OT needs the NT to be read. And the NT needs the stories of the OT to be really understood. If you just leap to the final chapter of the mystery novel and don't read the story as it unfolds, you have really missed something.

Needless to say, this is probably a little much if you are squeezing your sermon in between preschool kids singing and the dramatic retelling of the Christmas story by a group of 3rd-8th graders. But if you are singing lots of Christmas songs with those kids, this might work really well. Many of those songs make reference to Jesus the son of David. Here might be a great way to introduce them and the congregation to the message of the songs which we sing and perhaps which we hear too much as they are played in the mall and on the radio this time of year. They become so much back ground noise that we cease to consider the power metaphors and words which the hymn/song writer has composed for us. Your sermon might be profitably spent simply asking the folks to stop, consider, listen again, and take to heart the words they have sung or are about to sing.

We thought that this had some interesting sermon potential. David's son will build a house for the Lord. Of course, we imagine that it is a palace and temple. That is what David and Solomon certainly thought. But in fact the temple would be a stable, a humble family, a carpenter, a house-builder, who would build a temple for God not with wood and stone but with flesh and blood as he hung on a cross and as, resurrected, he builds a temple with living stones, you and me. There are some very useful handles/puns/crossover words which make this rich for the preacher.

Psalm 89:1-5 (19-29)

I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

² For I said, "Steadfast love will be built up forever;
in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness."

³ You have said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:

⁴ "I will establish your offspring forever,
and build your throne for all generations.'" Selah

⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!

¹⁹ Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said:
"I have granted help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.

²⁰ I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him,

²¹ so that my hand shall be established with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.

²² The enemy shall not outwit him;

the wicked shall not humble him.

²³ I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.

²⁴ My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.

²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.

²⁶ He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.'

²⁷ And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

²⁸ My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.

²⁹ I will establish his offspring forever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.

The psalm explores the mystery of the incarnation really, and the sacramental union we all enjoy with God as the body of Christ. It starts out as a meditation on the promise made to David in the OT reading today. God's steadfast love does not abandon the house of David. But the Psalm morphs about vs 24 into a discussion of something more than David. This is where the incarnational bit comes in.

For some strange reason, God does not send the angelic hosts to proclaim the good news; he does not raise his kingdom in the hosts of heaven, but through the simple and the poor. The intervening verses which are omitted in our Psalm deserve inclusion to highlight this point. The middle portion is primarily the Psalmist singing about the greatness of God. The forces of nature obey him, he establishes the world, creates the heavens, etc. But then, in verse 19 the strange incarnational part starts to take shape. A David is raised to be king. The audience all knew the backstory of David the lowly shepherd boy and youngest of Jesse's many sons who was anointed by Samuel. He is established by God's mighty hand, he is the servant of the Lord and through him the Lord works mighty things.

By the last verses this has become far more than the kingdom which David saw or even imagined. God was working the salvation of the world. This was not just the defeat of the Philistines, but all the enemies would lie vanquished before the feet of David's son, even death itself. This throne, because God is behind it, will be established forever, it is the throne of heaven and on it sits the Son of David, the second person of the Trinity, God.

It is clearly this psalm and other passages which influence Paul's deep re-reading of the OT after Jesus confronts him on the road to Damascus. Paul spends several years simply re-reading his OT. He had understood II Samuel 7 to be a political messiah or some sort of a eschatological promise, but this Psalm and Isaiah and others would help him re-envision the promise made to

David to take into account the reality he had encountered on the ground (literally as he was knocked from his horse and blinded) in that fateful encounter between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Romans 16:25-27

²⁵ Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

When things get really hectic at Church, sometimes a good doxology is really the best tack, and that is what this passage from Romans affords us. Of course, it has a great nugget in there which a preacher can develop. The obedience of faith which shows up in verse 26 echoes the same words in 1:1-6 in which Paul says that his whole ministry is about calling Gentiles to this obedience which comes from faith.

If you remember the discussion from this past summer when Romans was the epistle reading for most of that green season, the obedience of faith was contrasted with the alternatives. It was not an obedience which came from fear or from reward. It was not the obedience that came from respecting someone or even from being inspired by them. The obedience of faith is the obedience that comes from the relationship of love and care which God had established in our baptism and which he renews regularly in the life of the Christian.

This obedience hangs on God's gracious act on our behalf. It is purely response to Him, it is not a purchase in any way of his favor or his good will. That has already been given in Jesus. This is the mystery and the secret which was hidden for long ages in the people of God in Israel. Now it is known to all nations, to all the people of the world, even to us gentiles.

The Lutheran Confessions, in FC Articles 3 and 4 provide us with an insightful and thorough exploration of this idea of the obedience of faith. You might find Timothy Wengert's "A Formula for Parish Practice" (published by Eerdmann's) to be very helpful tool for unpacking this material. Not that any of you have the time to read this in the coming weeks, but a well placed hint for a Christmas present might just get you a very rewarding text to read in the new year.

Paul saw this as the revelation of a secret which had long been hidden. It was always there. God had said it in the promise he made to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations. And that is just one OT spot to look. Who hid it? Was it God or was it the people of God who failed to grasp what it was that the Torah, Isaiah, and others said about God's love for all the nations? Is Jonah really God great lament that even the prophets could get this terribly wrong? The revelation of this secret is manifested in the birth of Christ, not as a Jewish Savior but as humanity's savior. Now all the folks in the world, no matter color, race, place, or anything else about them can join in the angelic chorus: to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen

This preaches!

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "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 called holy—the Son of God.

³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent brings us the story of the Annunciation, which is celebrated normally on March 25, nine months prior to the Christmas feast. But because this is almost always buried deep in the season of Lent, most Lutherans and many Christians around the world don't observe it. Usually one has to slip into the back pew of a Catholic church to sing the Magnificat on March 25. We get this story again on the Fourth Sunday of Advent and if you can still make any changes to the worship services of your church at this late date, include Mary's song, if it is not there already. There are some wonderful settings as hymns in the hymnal, and there are some good plain song versions of it in the liturgical portions. Look in the evening prayer/vespers.

The preacher may want to use this Sunday to connect the worshiper to the creed. The virgin birth of Jesus show up in our creeds every Sunday. Why did the first Christians feel the need to say this every week? The creed is just too tightly conceived of a document to include a throw-away line. (Notice the conceive pun there.) Why do we continue to confess these words, especially in a day and age when some really stumble over this issue of a virgin birth and Spiritual conception? What is essential about this phrase and doctrine? Even Muslims assert the virgin birth of Jesus. Of course one might cite the whole issue of incarnation, but I wonder if there is not something more. After all, it is not inconceivable that God could have achieved the incarnation another way. From the very earliest of Christian witnesses, however, we have the assertion of the virgin birth. The only conspicuous silence is Paul whose epistles never make a direct mention of it, but

he also makes almost no mention of the miracles which Jesus performed either. An argument from silence is not persuasive anyway. We know that there were early attempts to claim Jesus was an illegitimate child of Mary and some unknown father, often said to be a Roman soldier. Origen in his response to Celsus in the second century addressed it.

What is it about the virgin birth that makes it an article of faith which we wrap into the creed? The most ardent defenders of the virgin birth today are often found among Roman Catholics, but one has to wonder if this doesn't have more to do with their Marian theology than with what this says about Jesus himself. The preacher will want to ask what this says about the Christ whom we preach.

But this can also dominate the discussion to a point at which you neglect the rest of it. Consider: "O favored one, the Lord is with you!" How much do our people need to hear those words from God's messengers (us) today? What does the angel mean when he says that Mary has found favor with God? Did she seek it? We know nothing of her before this encounter. What does it mean when we are said to have found favor with God because we are baptized?

Three years ago we noticed the gentleness of the angel here. When Zechariah asked a similar question, the sign he got was nine months muteness. Seemed like disproportionate responses to us. But then again, God never promises consistency according to our standards. When Job presents his case against God for his misfortunes, God appears and tells him that He is God, and Job is not, and that is really the end of it. Here God gently brings her to the point of assenting, of declaring her recognition of who she is. It is as though this is important to God. He wants those words from her. When she yields to this announcement, the angel is out of there. His job is done. Here, unlike other places, the angel doesn't make the announcement and that is the end of the job, here it really seems that he needs her assent. Is this co-operative work really essential to the salvation event? Must this be a loving act and does that preclude any sort of coercion? Considering the fact that this is all couched in a discussion of procreation with all the sexual implications, what does that mean? God seems to be asking permission for himself to use Mary's body to effect the incarnation.

We also wondered if this wasn't simply a point where Mary is saying, "Cool, I am a servant of God!" Is she taking the message of the angel as an affirmation of her identity? Does her word of "I am the servant" the joyful application of God's word to her own life?

Doesn't God do this same thing to us when he tells us that our words are the very words of heaven? "The sins you forgive on earth...." Do we have the chance to say, "I am a servant, let it be to me as the Lord has said." Baptism has made us the children of God. We bear his name.

Luther wrote that there were three great miracles of Christmas. The first was of course the virgin birth. Conception and birth don't happen that way, so this is a great miracle. But even greater is the miracle of the incarnation. That this miracle baby was not only a miracle in his conception and birth, but that the very creator and Lord of heaven and earth was laid in that

manger in Bethlehem and held on Mary's lap and carried in her womb. That is the second and greater miracle of Christmas. But the greatest miracle of Christmas was that either Mary or Joseph believed any of this! You could tie your sermons of this Sunday and Christmas Eve/Day together with this motif.

Today we really celebrate the fact that when the Angel came to Mary in that Nazareth house where she lived, presumably with her parents, she said "Yes." It is the obedience of faith. The angel made a promise, she believed the promise and the Savior was born. We celebrate an act of faith today, the same faith that brought your parishioners to church on this day, the same faith that will pack your church on Wednesday night for the Christmas Eve services and the same faith in which you yourself once said yes to a call from God to preach and teach and serve him in a ministry of word and sacrament.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in the faith often make a big deal of Mary, and perhaps they over do that. The fresco on the basilica of Notre Dame on the campus of the same name in Indiana has a picture of her sitting between the Father and the Son. Even the theology faculty of that very Catholic university has squirmed a little at that. Of course Protestants often react to that in a way that is just as much over the top. It is as though we would prove our devotion to Jesus by ignoring his mother. Neither of these reactions is particularly healthy. Mary stands in a unique double relationship to Jesus, a relationship which none of us totally share. She is a sinner whose sins were forgiven by Jesus on the cross. In that relationship we join her in his worship. But she was also his mother. She bore him. She is the Theotokos, the bearer of God. The Christological debates which culminated in Chalcedon in 451 centered around the use of that word. That means a little boy named Jesus called her the Aramaic version of "mommy." If we would forget that and fail to honor that, we put ourselves outside the witness of Scripture itself and the long tradition of God's faithful people. Mary, moved by the Spirit, later in this very chapter, will say that all generations will call her blessed. We should be one of those generations.

The question for us is how will we be one of those generations to call her blessed. It will not be by naming her a co-redemptrix, but it will be by joining her confession. "I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word." There is a sermon in this, indeed, more than one. This is the obedience of faith that Paul spoke of in the Epistle lesson today.

Is this the Advent repentance for this day? Is it to turn away from our self-sought idolatrous ways and to realize that God belongs at the center of our universe, no matter how small it might be at that moment? It is a very basic sort of message. It is the first commandment, it is saying that because Jesus has given his life for me on that cross he has bought the whole thing, every moment, every dollar, every cell in my body. I am the Lord's servant, his Word is my life.

But that is not a bad thing either. For God's word is a Word of life. His desire is that we be his and that he be ours, and that relationship we call faith is the very secret to the power of the

universe, to the eternal life we lost in a garden long ago, to the happiness, joy, peace, and perfection we long for. It is a good thing when God's Word has its way with us.

The angel's greeting to Mary and the promise he makes to her is based on the "favored" or "grace-filled" status before God. The word to which she assents and desires is not only the promise that she will have a child but also that she is favored by God. That is hard for us to believe, it is difficult for us to say and see, especially being a Lutheran in Advent when we are not really supposed to sing happy songs.

But the word, even for the Lutherans among us, is good. The Word to which Mary assents in this text is a blessing. She is favored, the Lord is with her. She is not alone. As we distribute the elements of the Lord's Supper this Sunday, shall we say "do not be afraid, you have found favor with God."

Law

1. We strive to solve our own problems, they are great and we work hard and at the end of the day we find ourselves exhausted and the problems have not gone away. How many social ills have not been addressed by the statements of well-meaning Christian groups and bodies? Yet, the social ills remain. How many Christians have not earnestly vowed to resist temptation, to conquer some sin, and yet found themselves just as mired in it as they ever were? We are not up to the task.
2. We try to define God's solutions for us. We pray our prayers and tell God what to give us, like petulant children making their Santa wish-lists, when most of the things on them would be a disaster if they were actually given. Like David and Solomon we hear may hear the promise, believe the promise, and then assume that we have pretty well figured God out.
3. Our obedience to God is too often not that obedience which comes from faith. We feel guilty so we come to church. We are afraid something will die if we don't volunteer to run it one more year. We are seeking something else, even something healthy, by our service to God, but are we really seeking God? Does his Word really have its way with us?
4. We find ourselves in obscurity and leading lives of a quiet desperation. Will we be just another victim for death's maw on that day? Does my life really have any meaning?
5. The service to God often involves things we would rather not do. Young girls who are not yet married do not healthily seek out pregnancy. Pregnancy, especially in the first century, is a risky and dangerous business. It hurts too. Ask your wife and she will probably be able to tell you just how much it hurts. Elderly women like Elizabeth also don't usually seek out a pregnancy. Raising children when you are the age of a grandmother is a great deal of work, as many of the men and women in our congregations have found out.

Gospel

1. God is a great solver of problems. When sin came into the world it brought with it a whole host of problems, issues which we face. When that first happened, God started planning for a solution, a real solution to these problems. It would take time and it would involve the sacrifice of his only-begotten Son, but he would not shrink from that. He would solve the sin issue.
2. God has a much bigger view than we do. David and Solomon thought that they had seen the salvation of God, but he was only beginning. The Son of David who would build the house would build a much grander thing than the wooden and stone structure that Solomon built for all its glory. Jesus would build with people, a structure some two billion people strong today, and he is still building. He will build until that last day when he takes his people home to be where he is, and as he is, perfectly and blissfully happy. It is bigger than I can imagine, but I can trust him to do it. My life is in his hands and that is a really good place to be.
3. And so, though we are often blind, he takes us by the hand and gives us the faith which we cannot gin up ourselves. We find ourselves a bundle of mixed emotions and motivations, but he does not care. He just loves us, and that despite ourselves. He takes the broken human being and begins a great work in them. No, they have not got it all right, but he is not letting that bother him. This is a precious child for whom He has died and risen again. He loves to see you laugh. He loves to come to your Christmas parties. He loves to rest with you in your home. He loves you.
4. And that love of Jesus, not your skill, not your accomplishments, that love of Jesus gives meaning and purpose to your life. The words you say, the deeds you do, the gifts you give, the care you show, those are occasions for his love and his life to shine. He noticed and delighted in the simple faith of a peasant girl named Mary. Through no special skill on her part other than being a parent, something many of us have done or will do, God worked a great thing. So too, your life, is not so obscure or so small that it has escaped his attention. He works through just such people as you.
5. And that means that our lives of service become strangely lives of Joy for us. Mary would suffer pain and heartache in bearing this child. Simeon will predict that a sword will pierce her heart. His words must have been remembered on that day when she watched her son die, and yet, if that was all we said, we would be remiss. Jesus died for the sins of the world. Her gift of a life, a womb in which he grew, a home in which he was raised, the care of a mother who ran back to Jerusalem to find her adolescent in the temple, the love which followed him throughout his ministry, that simple service was part of God saving the world. Likewise we can get up early or stay up late in God's service.

We can eschew a better salary or some other worldly perk, we can work hard, and still know a joy the world does not understand. We are the servants of the king, His Word is having its way with us. And that is a good thing.

Sermon Ideas

1. “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be according to your Word” (Gospel: That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to join Mary in both her confession and prayer today)

A quick survey of the problems of my life and the rest of this world lead me to a terrible conclusion. I don’t have the answer and you don’t either. The problems are too big and we are too small. In response, we can try to control our own little corner of the creation, but that comes with its own problems. Mary today presents us with another way to deal with that sinful reality, the way of the faithful “yes.” I am sure that Mary, engaged to Joseph, had lots of plans for how her life was supposed to go. I don’t know if the couple had registered their china pattern at the local department store or not, but I can only imagine that they had done the first century equivalent. But one day an angel came and changed all of that. This would not be a fairy tale sort of event. Joseph has serious second thoughts when he finds out about this. He doubts the integrity of her commitment to him. He feels betrayed by this. The bride was pregnant on the day of the wedding. The honeymoon trip would be difficult and end in a stable with the girl giving birth to a child in less than ideal conditions. And yet, around the world, this Wednesday night and Thursday, billions of people will remember the birth of that child. Gifts will be given which remember that gift. Feasts will be consumed which remember that in that child we are all rich. Families will gather because God joined a little family on that first Christmas. In her surrender of her whole life to God, God worked the salvation of the world.

Mary starts with a bold confession. She is the servant of God. Isn’t she really telling Gabriel that she is also a servant just as he is a servant? That’s a gutsy thing for a peasant girl to say to an archangel of God. The angel’s message to her has identified her. God’s message to us has also identified us. In Baptism he has declared us to be his children, his servants, his emissaries to this benighted world. He has made us his very hands and feet, his instruments of salvation. Mary owns who she is in these words. She believes what the angel says. This is a word from God he has spoken, both to her and the word God has spoken to us. We are his!

I don’t have the solutions to the problems but God does and in his great wisdom he has chosen to solve problems, bring salvation, through the simple and small, the humble and the regular people of this world, the people just like you. We are all the servants of the Lord, and His Word has its way with us. That means that every word we speak, every deed we do becomes loaded with his potentiality. It is not the feeble deed of another

human when a Christian stops to care for and love another human being. God is afoot in those little encounters, saying, "Let it be according to Your Word!"

We join with Mary's prayer as well. God has made us servants with a potent message, a promise from him. We hang on that promise, we eagerly look for it. Let your word be done!

2. "How Can This Be, I Am...Me?" (That the hearer would believe that God does delight in his/her life and welcomes the opportunity to celebrate this bright holiday with all his family.)

We often like to think of ourselves as unimportant in the greater scheme of things. The world certainly affirms that. I will not be a president or a senator. I would be hard pressed to run for a local office and win. As the world measures importance and significance, I may well be fairly far down the list of potentates. But there is one evaluation I need never wonder about. On a singular day some two thousand years ago, the angel Gabriel came to a humble peasant girl, an even smaller nobody than any of us. Of course her name was Mary and she would become the mother of Jesus. She asked a marvelous question. How can this be? I am a virgin. The angel's answer is even more marvelous. It was not about who Mary was, it was about God.

This sermon really ties into the gentleness which we noted in the notes under the Gospel lesson. The angel does not rebuff Mary's question. But he gently explains to her. Our own doubts about our worthiness are also greeted by God's great gentleness. He really does want to spend the holidays with you.

Likewise God says to each of us that we are important to him today. He has invited himself personally into your home. He is not coming to judge the quality of your Christmas dinner, or the freshness of your tree, or the size of the presents under that tree. He is coming because he likes you, because he wants to spend time with you, because he knows you and delights in you. There is no one beneath His notice, there is no one whose life is not precious to Him. This is God's gracious doing, not hanging on your specialness or cuteness or goodness. He honestly just likes you, he has had a thing for you since he gazed into your eyes on the day of your baptism. So, next Sunday will see him tucking into Christmas feasts around this country. He will drink wine with the Christians in California, go sledding with the kids after the meal in upstate New York. He will stand in line in the shelters and spend a few hours with the humblest of his servants there. In the southern Hemisphere it is summer now, I understand that it is a tradition to have a Christmas barbeque on the beach in Argentina. He will stand in the hot sun there and enjoy the feast. Mary wondered how it could happen that she should be so favored. It is a good question to which God has a great answer. It is all about him, his love, his mercy, his grace. He looks forward to Sunday, and every day, with you.

When we thought about this sermon three years ago we wondered what problem it solved. Does it need to? This is just a good thing to say. We are a week from Christmas. I would imagine that the stress of this season has everyone pretty well aware of their problems. It might be time just to say that Jesus is coming for dinner. He likes you.

3. Promise fulfilled (That the Spirit of God would instill faithful trust in the promises of God in the hearer)

The New Testament is adamant about this point. Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise which God made to David. David may not have understood it fully, his son Solomon may have also misunderstood it. Indeed, every generation of Jew prior to the birth of Jesus may have actually gotten this promise really and truly wrong, but God still kept it. Jesus, the son of Mary, claimed by Joseph as his son, connected legally and biologically to David, fulfilled this promise God had made to David a millennium earlier.

We too are the recipients of God's deep, mysterious, and beautiful promises which are all tied to this promise keeping event. Having taken up our human nature to himself, Jesus has conquered sin. As John so often says, the one who is in us is stronger than the world. There is no problem out there which will overcome the one who has taken up residence in us. No, not even death. The resurrection of this child born in Bethlehem from that Jerusalem tomb trumpets the shattering of death's otherwise eternal grip. His bodily ascension is a promise to each of us that life, true life, is ours in Him.

The world would sow disbelief throughout our lives. Betrayal and disappointment abound. There will be those who are grieving this Christmas. Some for the lack of presents, some for the lack of someone, others for countless other reasons. The season of joy is always darkened by the grief of some, if not all of us. We will struggle with these promises, but here is the good news. God doesn't. Our hearts waver and flutter about like leaves before the autumn wind, but our Father's heart and mind are always steadfast and focused on the promises he has made to us.

Nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the gift of this child and the man he would become. The angel tells us that he will be the salvation of mankind, the long awaited messiah. Humanity had waited and despaired, been called back to faith, and fallen a thousand times since God spoke that promise to our parents as they were cast out of a garden long ago. How many humans had forgotten it? But God never did. And he kept that promise of a seed who would crush Satan's head. He kept the promise of an eternal son for David who would sit upon the throne forever.

4. And the angel waited for her response (Gospel – that the hearer would rest in God's gentle and loving care.)

The Angel Gabriel is very gentle with Mary. What does this tell us about God? God has been working this plan for millennia and yet here we see him waiting for a response from

Mary. The angel reasons with her, explains it carefully. Gabriel is bigger than any superhero depicted in blockbuster movies. He really can hurl balls of fire and thunderbolts at his enemies. He is an arch-angel, after all. Satan trembles at the approach of Gabriel. But here he is patiently explaining and waiting on the response of a humble girl in a tiny hovel of a home in a backwater town of Galilee. As soon as she gives it, he is out of there. But that response, that “yes” from Mary was critical to the plan, to the working out of this world’s salvation. This tells us something important about God. He is not forcing this, he is loving this. He will not take from this girl whom the world surely does not value.

Don’t run this into a decision theology. Notice the second sermon idea above. Mary confesses a reality which is already so. She is not becoming the servant of God. She has already been told that the favor of God rests upon her. She is confessing what is so and acting on it. That said, God is very considerate of her in that relationship. One gets the picture of the angel patiently reasoning with this young woman, patiently waiting for her response. He cares what she will say.

Could this be a time to talk about some current events? Christian and Yazidi women and girls have been seized by ISIS and sold in to slavery. Young women in college seem to be victimized by predatory fellow students quite often. Recent events in the world suggest that women are too often the objects and victims of bullying and abusive behavior at work, on the bus, or just about anywhere else. Our world does not always value these young women. Mary likely was illiterate. She was surely poor. She was a teenage peasant girl. The world did not then and likely would not today care much for what she has to say. But God did.

God cares about you, your life, and what you have to say today as well. Our Lord is gentle with us. Sometimes we would like God to be more forceful. When our loved one stops going to church or starts misbehaving, we sometimes wish that God would shake them up, force them to behave. But do we really want that? Do we really want the obedience that comes through law and power? Such a change of behavior is not the change of the person, it is a begrudging obedience, not the obedience of Faith to which Paul refers in the Epistle lesson today. God doesn’t work that way.

We Christians have not always gotten this right. We have at times tried to force people to convert to Christianity. We have sought to enforce our rules on others. The preacher will need to be sensitive to this.

Women who have endured abuse, especially from their fathers, will be blessed to hear that the Father to whom they pray the Lord’s Prayer is not like that father. He does not force, he does not take, he does not abuse.

God is not a bully. Too often we have ascribed to God omnipotent power and left it there. Pagans portrayed their God's as fickle and capricious powers. God is not safe, but in the words of C. S. Lewis, he is good. He has not been domesticated and will not stay long on our leash which we want to put around his neck. Here in this reading, however, we find that God's kingdom is upside down. Jesus will have stern words for the religious leaders of his day. But he will always have gentle and sweet words for the man or woman who has been hammered by the Law of sickness, death, or the simple vagaries of life. Where our world would commend the successful and blame the person on the bottom of the heap, God's upside down, cross-shaped kingdom sees this differently. Mary's opinion, her yes, her permission is important to this project. God will not do this without her "yes."

5. The God of Surprises (That the hearer would trust God to be a faithful and loving presence in our lives.)

God surprises lots of people today. He surprises David by building him into a house. He surprises Mary and Joseph today. They were not planning on this turn of events. He surprises us too. The Epistle suggests that we are the servants of God, called by him to an obedience of faith which looks a great deal like Mary's "yes" in the Gospel lesson. We are servants of the Lord, His word has free course with us.

Surely this involves surprises for all of us. The people of Jesus' day were so surprised that they rejected the Lord. Surprises can almost blind us sometimes. We are just not ready for them. But when we think about our surprising God, the surprises can be occasions of great joy and wonderful turns. Who would have thought that God would do it this way, using a humble peasant girl or a silly Lutheran? God loves to use these sorts of surprises. He saved the people of old with Esther's dinner parties. He brought Israel out of Egypt with an octogenarian shepherd named Moses. He slew a giant once with a shepherd boy and had an ancient Abraham and Sarah get up in the middle of the night to take care of their newborn son. God likes surprises and when he works a surprise, it is a good surprise.

I am not a prophet who can tell the future, but I can tell you this. He is not done with his surprises. He turned a Saul to a Paul, who would have ever thought he could do that. He used a loser like Peter and went to a cross where he defeated sin, death, and Satan. He surprised us all on Easter and he is still at it. What will he do today, tomorrow, and thereafter in you and your life? Who knows. But while I will be surprised, I am looking forward to those surprises like I look forward to being surprised by the contents of brightly wrapped gifts sitting under my tree.