

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, year 'B'
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The Rev'd Leighton Lee

Why are we so uncomfortable with the Virgin Mary? Despite all of our claims to being truly catholic, and despite the presence in our churches of much that was, even two generations ago, considered the acme of Roman Catholicism, Anglicans by and large still have a difficult time with the Virgin Mary. Do we find her troublesome because we live with a curiously comingled inheritance: sacramental catholicism on one hand and evangelical protestantism on the other, and she is a symbol of an impossibly wide gulf? Or do we have difficulty with her because she seems to fall into an odd but somehow disquieting collection of "catholic" things we would rather avoid: the rosary, relics, incense and stations of the cross? Perhaps it's because she represents the archetypal submissively obedient female, all too ready to yield to the demands of a strong male figure. Maybe it's because conventional Marian piety has made her into an impossible figure: she is both a plain girl and Queen of Heaven, a lowly mother and a perpetual virgin, a humble person like ourselves who is also venerated, who also just happens to give voice to one of the most famous – and most beautiful – songs ever sung!

While these questions and objections may be part of the tapestry of our awkwardness about Mary, I think there is another reason, a deeper reason, why we find her uncomfortable. I think the reason we are uncomfortable with her is that in her story we are confronted with an impossibly naïve picture of a supernatural event whereby God is brought to birth in this world through an ordinary, simple and even lowly human being. The story defies logic. A plain nobody of a girl, who has done nothing important with her life, finds favour with God. A plain nobody of a girl has the presence of mind, and depth of spirituality, to accept the call of God without reservation. A plain nobody of a girl becomes the mother to divine life. It's all too much to take in, let alone believe.

It's too much to believe, for if God could choose to become incarnate by someone like Mary, why couldn't he also choose to become incarnate by someone like you – or me? That is the real point his outrageous story asks us to ponder, which is why, I suspect, the Church, has endowed her with such elaborate spiritual, theological and legendary paraphernalia. Knowing that most people would balk at such a notion, the Church made Mary a kind of spiritual surrogate who would do our work for us. Like the stories of other saints, hers is enlarged, overlaid, exaggerated; and since we can't be like *that*, we think that we are let off the hook of being co-workers in bringing God and his Kingdom to birth.

And so the question that confronts you and me this season is, can we bring God to birth in our lives and our world? Can we be bearers of God's word and truth in a

world no less dark, no less in thrall to the power of a great secular empire, no less confused as to the meaning of life, the purpose of religion and the nature of God than was Mary's world? The temptation is for you and me to abrogate our duty and to stay on the sidelines of life. After all, we're no one special, so what can we do that will be of any value? What can we say that will even be heard? When we think about all of the problems of this life and this world, and how huge every one of them is, we are afraid. We don't know where to begin and what to do and say, and so we don't even make an effort – we don't do or say anything, except to say to ourselves, "They're too big to take on, and I'm too small to make a difference."

By playing it safe, by keeping silent, we help to perpetuate those huge problems of life and the world. They won't go away on their own, and if we close our eyes to the hurt, pain, hypocrisy, misery and hatred we see everywhere, we will one day open them to find things have gotten even worse. We cannot shut out the voices that call out for reconciliation, justice, restoration, peace and reformation; they will grow ever louder. We cannot stay on the sidelines, hoping for a miracle.

God's people did just that for generations. The voices of the prophets cried out, bidding people to repentance and reformation of life. Time and time again they warned that the time would come when it would be too late. But no one listened, and things went from bad to worse, and time ran out.

"But wait," you say. "A miracle *did* happen. A hero *did* come to save them." That's true, of course. However, my point is this: Jesus didn't come in a blazing flash of glory, fully formed, radiating divinity. He came born of a human mother. God needed humanity to participate with him, to be his co-worker, in order that he could come on earth. We so often neglect the human equation in this story! The real miracle, I think, is that there was one alert enough to listen to the message of an angel, and brave enough to take up the challenge. Yes, she said, "How can this be?" but she also said, "Let it be with me according to your word."

We have been made timid by the blankness and futility of life. Our world teeters on the brink of collapse – economic, social and political – while Churches have almost passed into memory, becoming places where it seems only strident and hateful voices are heard. We have been ground down by our own disappointments and failures. Our lives are held together by a thin cord of ambition, fear and shame, and we lurch from one empty form of self-gratification to another as our spirits shrivel and grow cold. We have come to believe that we are victims of heredity, environment and circumstance, with no capacity to transcend the conditions of our lives and are, thereby, content to sit still and watch the passing show.

God needs us to bring his saving word to birth in this world. I might even say that he can't do it without us. The divine invitation requires a human response. The great theme of Advent is that of preparation. We always say we're preparing for Christ to come again at Christmas. If that's all preparation means, why don't we simply cut to the chase right now? We all know how the story ends, and so this preparation is

simply an exercise in pointless, if fiddlingly irritating, piety. The *real* preparation of which Advent speaks is something that is ongoing; it is a rule of life we must learn to cultivate. It isn't only an Advent activity, but is a daily and life-long activity. In this context, preparation doesn't mean getting ready as much as it means being ready. Ready for what? To respond to the angels of God who come to us and ask us to bear Christ to the world. But we can only be prepared, can only be ready, when we've mastered our own doubts, fears and limitations. Until we can do this, we will never see the angels, nor hear their voices.

So this preparation comes to fruition in our lives when we learn to be attentive to the world around us, to the people we meet, to the experiences we have. In each one, God is speaking into our souls and asking us if we will allow ourselves to be used by him so that he may be incarnate anew. The real preparation allows us to hear the angels of God who speak to us and give us strength to pluck beauty out of the stony places of the world, courage to give voice to the song of joy that is at the heart of all things and faith to bring to birth the surprising power of God known through the example of humble and loving service. Let it be to us according to his word.

Lord, it is difficult for us to believe that you call us to be bearers of Jesus to the world. Let us understand, this season above all, that you need us to be co-workers with you in the bringing to birth of your kingdom of love, peace and joy. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to respond to your call. Use us as vessels of your love. Amen.