

Luke 1:26-38
Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 24, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the angel Gabriel's announcement from God to Mary, highlighted thusly: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Every year's Advent meditation moves from the appearance of the forerunner John to the news of the virgin birth to the account of the night of our Savior's birth. Of course, such is a *theologically*-based order of meditation, not a *chronologically*-based order. John was only six months older than Jesus, as the angel Gabriel told Mary that her relative Elizabeth was six months pregnant with the child whose name would be John. So, John's preparatory preaching happened chronologically some thirty years *after* the birth of Christ. But, that's obviously not our main concern when meditating upon it in mid-Advent.

In Advent, the concern is noticing the divine signs, the prophecies long-promised now coming to fruition... first, those prophecies that 'prepare the way,' then those prophecies that promised that day when the Lord's Christ would take on human flesh and blood.

So, for as much reason as we have to thank God for the undeniably clear sign of the forerunner – the Elijah who is to come, as long promised by Isaiah and Malachi – we equally have reason to thank God for (and meditate upon) the undeniably clear sign that the prophecy of the Christ’s incarnation was coming to pass.

And, in fact, it’s not really a *sign* for which we thank God as much as it is the angelic messenger coming to relay the news from the Lord himself... the Lord himself saying, “I have taken action, my plan is coming to its fulfillment in human flesh and blood.” Just as the angel came to Zechariah to speak of the forerunner’s *miraculous* conception, the same angel now comes to Mary to speak of the Messiah’s *divine* conception.

There’s a difference between that which is miraculous and that which is divine, isn’t there? To be sure, that which is miraculous must come from the divine, by the power and permission of the divine. (It’s improper to explain anything you can’t personally understand as ‘a miracle’! Reserve that word, for it belongs to the divine!) But the *miraculous* conception of John, to aged Elizabeth and Zechariah, still pales in comparison to that which we confess of the Christ: “he was incarnate (conceived) *by the Holy Spirit* of the virgin Mary and was made man.”

And, with this marvelous truth, the great sign of God's long-promised plan of salvation, is now in history's time manifest: "the virgin shall conceive..."

If the visible presence of 'Elijah who is to come', of the 'man sent **from** (παρα – intimately near, as we heard last week)... sent **from** God' – if *that* ought awaken us to be on the lookout for the unveiling of God's plan of salvation, then most certainly, the visible presence of a virgin having conceived is even *moreso* a sign of the intimate nearness of the coming Messiah... in fact, not intimate *near-ness*, but intimate "*there-ness*" (or, shall we say "here-ness")... enthroned in the virgin's womb.

Thus, we confess not just the virgin birth, but the virgin conception: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit." This is such a marvelous truth of history – the work of God to lower himself into humanity – that the devil has long sought to distract us from it. Yes, the evil foe is so tireless, he not only seeks to oppress you personally, but he also seeks to reinterpret history, that you may despair of its good news:

Already in the first century, the devil tried to distract from the incarnation of the Christ by whispering into man's thinking the lie that flesh matters little compared to the spirit – that we are really souls trapped in human shells, that being incarnate is not

nearly as heavenly as being spiritual... so, who cares that the Christ became flesh when we all long to become spirit... that Christ descended into the flesh when we are all trying to ascend to the spiritual? What a lie that affects us still today, but was already attacking the truth of the incarnation of our Lord even in the first century.

Some 1000 years later, the devil tried a different tactic: the immaculate conception not of Christ, but of Mary! Within the dogma that Roman Catholicism imposed on the Church, the supposed perfect righteousness of Mary the Mother, as if more holy and above all flesh, was to be adored by the worshipers, distracting them from worshiping the true righteousness of Christ who is to be adored because He took on flesh for us men and for our salvation.

Now, some 1000 years after that, the devil tries yet other tactics. He teaches the masses to bend the knee to a worship of Science – Scientism – that seeks to replace God as not only the Creator but also the Procreator. It has tried to turn the natural, yet divine, work of God's procreative work in the womb into a manufactured exercise in test tubes. And if conception naturally, yet divinely, woven is no longer needed because science can artificially mimic it in laboratories, then this conception is no longer to be valued as God's procreative work in nature, nor as the

beginning of His saving work in the incarnation of the Christ. And, if natural procreative conception is no longer needed but is seen as inconvenient to us controlling our own lives and destiny, then the life it begets can be dismissed by the worshippers of Scientism, and abortion can loudly proclaim how little the conceived Christ should be cherished as the Lord enthroned in the virgin's womb.

And, why does the devil try such tactics as to get you to value 'abortion as a good and necessary defense against God's unwanted action' but because the devil knows that the conception and birth of the Christ is more than a 'sign' of promises fulfilled; and it's even more than a guide to whether conception is to be morally defended or denied as the beginning of life. No, the devil wants you to hear the word 'conception' as a possible unwanted or inconvenient, uncontrolled action that you might also downplay in your heart (as an unwanted, inconvenient, uncontrolled action) the conception of the Christ... His conception being the very first step of the Messianic mission in history being fulfilled. Yes, if conception means *life*, then the conception of the Christ means your salvation draws nigh. It means the angel Gabriel brings to Mary news not just about a miracle, but about salvation... not just about *the fertility of the virgin* being 'enacted', but about *the fertility of God's salvific plans*

being ‘enacted.’ How does the Introit’s refrain say it?: “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit.”

...“rain down righteousness” ... “salvation and righteousness bear fruit” ... Yes, the fertility of God’s plan of salvation is the righteousness of Christ on behalf of us men. For our conceptions did not produce righteousness. (This is the other big theological point of the necessity that Christ be conceived by the Holy Spirit, isn’t it?) Whenever you confess Christ taking on humanity by the conception wrought by the Holy Spirit, you are also implicitly confessing the reason such was necessary – because you and I were conceived from Adam in utter sin. The conception of the Christ proves that you and I aren’t basically ‘good’ or ‘neutral’ people who just need to make the right decisions for Jesus. We were “dead” in our trespasses and sins, St Paul says. We were “born in iniquity, in sin since my mother conceived me” the psalmist says. There is *no* hope for salvation to come through Adam’s line, and that means your own salvation cannot come through your own heart, lips, limbs, life, or lineage.

Indeed, the wondrous mystery of the virgin conception and Christ’s incarnation is not simply that God *could* make it happen, but His intended *benefit* for making it happen: “for us and

for our salvation.” Or, as the angel relays the divine message: “You shall call his name Jesus (“God saves”). He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Luther says that the miracle even greater than the virgin conception is that the virgin believed it as the angel declared it: “May it be unto me as you have said.” So also, the miracle even greater than the news of the virgin conception coming true in history is that – amidst all the Scientism and unbelief of our age – the Holy Spirit would sustain for you this wonderful good news of history, that you may know that the divine conception happened ... it came to pass to fulfill Genesis 3 (“the seed of the woman”) and Isaiah 7 (“the virgin shall conceive”)... and those were fulfilled not only to manifest God’s power over the foe but to manifest God’s grace to you. How does our Collect of the Day teach us to pray: “Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might” – notice, not just “**wow** us with Your might”, but “**help** us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy.”

“Help us... that our sins may be quickly lifted.” That most certainly is what Christ became incarnate to achieve on the cross. And it’s what the incarnate Christ again achieves today, as He gives us the same body and blood once upon the cross, once in the

manger, once enthroned in the virgin's womb. By it, our sins are quickly lifted, our consciences helped, the good news of our salvation is again applied. He is still God with us in the flesh.

That – God with us in the flesh – is the forever after wondrous mystery of the conception and incarnation of the Son of God. Not just that God would cause a virgin to conceive a child, but that the Child would be God *with* and *for* us, as the angel was sent to declare: “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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

It all sounds so heavenly, so other-worldly, so ‘spiritual.’ And yet, it is all true within human history, in human flesh and blood. God, in flesh and blood, “the God-man”, doing the work of our salvation, reigning not just over the old creation, but over the Church He will deliver unto the new creation. All accomplished by God becoming man... as St Paul calls it in his letter to the Romans,

“the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 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...”

Yes, even before the resurrection, even before the crucifixion, even before the *birth* of Christ, faith can rest securely in God, for the virgin *conception* revealed in time the mystery formerly disclosed through the prophetic writings... the mystery that God would provide your salvation, that faith may rest in His grace.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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