

DECEMBER 21, 2008
ADVENT 4
“LET IT BE”

Let us pray: Gracious God, give us the faith of Mary to also be able to say “Let it be,” “Let it be with me according to your word.” In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

This is, of course, the season of Christmas pageants. I don’t remember any prayer in the little two-room country school I attended as a kid, but I do remember how excited we used to get as Christmas drew near and we would get let out of class to walk across the county highway to the brown brick Oconomowoc Town Hall for the final dress rehearsals for our school Christmas program which included skits and singing and one time I remember all to well, my trumpet solo—perhaps as a fourth or fifth grader—when my trumpet was so out of tune that my dad—also a trumpeter, had to come up and tune it for me in order for

me to get through whatever it was I was trying to play.

But church, of course, was where the real Christmas pageant took place the Sunday night before Christmas and I remember all too well what seemed the interminable succession of Saturday afternoons (it probably was all of a couple) preceding when we would have to give up our free afternoons of ice skating or tobogganing to gather at church to rehearse our lines and choreograph our entrances and exits and check out our costumes and rehearse our songs for the annual Christmas pageant played out before this very same Torvaldsen statue of Jesus—although my boyhood Jesus was painted and larger than ours here in LA, though quite a bit smaller than the gigantic version found in the Mormon visitor center up the Boulevard.

The pageant, in my memory, was always directed by Loraine Petersen—a nice enough lady and mother of my classmate and cousin Jerry—but Loraine, herself a

public school teacher, directed those Saturday afternoon rehearsals with the no-nonsense iron hand of a General Patton, putting up with absolutely no shenanigans from her surly crew of bathrobed actors — most of us cousins — which didn't help the discipline problem she faced from her recalcitrant cast.

For us staunch Lutherans, as I remember my upbringing, Mary wasn't much in evidence in our liturgy and piety, outside of our annual Christmas pageant when the best-looking of the adolescent girls among us — like Patricia Balkman — another shirt-tail cousin — would be tapped to be this year's Mary and tend to the swaddled doll in the wooden manger, as I remember it, without ever saying a line. Whether it was out of embarrassment at the unspoken sexual implications of the angel's message of Mary's impending pregnancy or the latent anti-Catholicism that made even mention of Mary a danger to right-thinking Lutherans, I'm not sure — but I don't think either the

Annunciation or Mary's Magnificat ever made it into our Christmas pageants—or for that matter our lectionaries in those days.

All of which finally brings us to today's Gospel reading, a story so well known and oft-depicted by artists over the years—see the Fra Angelico rendering hanging in the narthex which is one of my favorites—that the occasion even has its own name—"The Annunciation" which simply means 'The Announcement.'" Even if it isn't usually included in most of the Christmas pageants we've seen, St. Luke tells the story almost as though it were a scene—the beginning scene—of his own carefully plotted and choreographed Christmas pageant. Try to think of it in those terms.

Martin Luther seems to have had a special affection for this story and especially for its subject, Mary. Brother Martin does his best, in the context of his own day, to imagine what it must have been like for Mary to receive this astonishing announcement—this shocking word from

the angel, the messenger of God— which at least initially seemed less good than frightening news.

Luther comments: *“The name of the maiden was Mary. The Hebrew form of the name is Miriam, and means ‘bitter myrrh.’ Why she was given this name I do not know, save that the Jews had the custom of naming children from the circumstances of their birth. Now the time when Christ should come was one of utter bitterness and extreme poverty for the Jews. They were a downtrodden people and their lot was pitiable **like ours today** (Luther editorializes) so that all might well weep bitterly.”*

“Among the downtrodden,” Luther goes on, *“she was one of the lowliest, not a maid of high station in the capital city, but a daughter of a plain man in a small town....Her age (Luther guessed) was probably between thirteen and fifteen years. And yet this,”* Luther marveled, *“was the one whom God chose. God might have gone*

to Jerusalem and picked out Caiaphas' daughter, who was fair, rich, clad in gold-embroidered raiment, and attended by a retinue of maids in waiting. But God," Luther said, "***preferred a lowly maid from a mean town.***"

"Quite possibly Mary was doing the housework when the Angel Gabriel came to her," Luther imagined, for as he was not above using this as an opportunity to moralize, "*angels prefer to come to people as they are fulfilling their calling and discharging their office*" just like the angels appeared to those shepherds doing their jobs, remember, keeping watch over their sheep by night! Luther likes to imagine, as many of those medieval paintings and woodcuts of the scene depict, that Mary was busy praying for the redemption of her people. "*During prayer,*" Luther comments knowingly, "*the angels are wont to appear.*"

The Reformer from Wittenberg goes on: "*The angel greeted Mary and said, 'Hail*

Mary, full of grace.” Now that’s the Latin rendering, Luther notes, “*which unhappily has been taken over literally into German.*” But Luther, the biblical scholar and translator of the Bible into German, asks testily: “*Tell me, is this good German? Would any German say you are full of grace? He knows what you mean if you say that a purse is full of gold but what is he to make of a girl full of grace? I,*” Luther said, “*have translated it simply, ‘Thou gracious one,’ but if I were really to write German, I would say, ‘God bless you, dear Mary—liebe Maria’—for any German knows that this word liebe comes right from the heart.*”

“*Dear Mary,*” the angel says, Luther goes, on, “*the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. ... You have a gracious God.’ No woman has ever lived on earth to whom God has shown such grace. You are the crown among them all.*”

“*These words,*” Luther goes on, “*so overwhelmed the poor child that she did not*

know where she was. Then the angel comforted her and said: 'Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and, behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the son of the Highest. And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David (think here of our Hebrew Scripture reading from I Samuel) and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.'

"To this poor maiden marvelous things were announced," Luther observed, "that she should be the mother of the All Highest, whose name should be the Son of God. He would be a King and of his Kingdom there would be no end. It took a mighty reach of faith to believe that this baby would play such a role. Well might Mary have said," Luther imagined, "'Who am I, little worm, that I should bear a King?' She might have doubted, but she shut her eyes and trusted in God who could bring all things to pass, even

though common sense were against it; and because she believed, God did to her as he had said.

She was indeed troubled at first and inquired, ‘How can these things be, seeing that I know not a man?’ She was flesh and blood, after all,” Luther admitted, “and for that reason the angel reassured her saying, ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you, and therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.’

*“Wherefore,” Luther concluded, “St. Bernard declared there are here three miracles: that God and humanity should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. **The last is not the least of the three.**”*

Putting his own theological spin on St. Bernard’s words, Luther asserted: *“The Virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that*

*God should become a man is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is it that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God. She did indeed inquire of the angel, ‘How can these things be?’ and he answered,” Luther says with more than a touch of humor, “‘Mary, you have asked too high a question for me, but the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and you will not know yourself how it happens. **Had she not believed,**” Luther asserted, “**she could not have conceived.** She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature.”*

*“Even so,” Luther preaches, “so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. Otherwise Christ is born in vain. This is the word of the prophet: ‘**Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.**’ This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that He is the son of the*

*Virgin and God godself, as to believe that **this Son of God is ours.... Truly it is marvelous in our eyes that God should place a little child in the lap of a virgin and that all our blessedness should lie in him. And this child belongs to all humankind. God feeds the whole world through a Babe nursing at Mary's breast.***"

Isn't that a wonderfully vivid and poignant image, of God feeding "*the whole world through a Babe nursing at Mary's breast.*" All made possible, Luther never stopped marveling, by Mary's God-given willingness to say "**Let it be**" to God's astonishing Word. And so may we, the church, as Luther said, learn to sing Mary's song after her—and teach the world to sing Mary's rendition of "let it be" as well.

Let St. Paul's closing words to the Church at Rome be our benediction for today as we stand on the brink of Christmas: "*Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to*

*the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but now is disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever! Amen. And have a very Mary, that's spelled, **M-A-R-Y**, Christmas.*

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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