

Advent 4 (B)
II Samuel 7.1-16/Psalm 89/Romans 16.25-27/Luke 1.26-38
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
21 December 2008

~Paul H. Friesen~

There aren't many shopping days left till Christmas, and as you know the consumer season just keeps getting sillier. We're told to spend lots to keep our world afloat, though we know the making and buying and tossing of stuff no one really needs is the reason for our sinking feeling in the first place.

But it's our world, and we can't pretend we're not a part of it, or that its clock isn't our clock too.

In commercial time, the parking lots are jammed, and the floors are choked with people. You can almost feel the groans of a thousand souls, as true charity and generosity, and greed and undisciplined desire, all mingle and tangle and conflict in one hall, of one floor, of one mall.

On our street even the decorations are weary. I was greeted one evening this week by a neighbour's giant snow man whose daily journey from pile of vinyl to an inflated figurine was stalled half-way, and the poor fellow tilted downhill as if he were drunk at 6.00 pm.

And in our home, and maybe yours too, there are lists—good lists of good things that distract us.

There are lists of food, airplane flights arriving and departing, visitors coming and going, and social invitations (mostly refused because at our stage of family life of course we don't have much of what is—conventionally—called 'a social life'.)

So I listened with sympathy to the catchy Christmas tune called the 'Elf's Lament' on pop radio a few times this week in Halifax.¹ Sometimes one feels a little despair.

We're all caught up in 'secular time', and that's not all bad. We share it with everybody. But we're also Christians, all of us here, so today is also the beginning of the fourth week of Advent—the fourth week of 'real time', as we should call it.

¹ A song performed by the well-known Canadian band known as the *Barenaked Ladies*, who are neither bare, nor naked, nor ladies, but middle-aged guys like me—except musically talented. You might want to google the song if you need a break!

Advent time is real time. And though this Christian season is almost spent, it only gets richer, deeper, more mysterious. It's time going somewhere.

No matter what we do or don't do, Christmas will arrive. But it's good to live in real time, as this makes arrival at our destination what it's meant to be, prepared for Christ.

In the first three weeks of Advent we began to prepare for Christmas; we spoke first of divine judgement that is meant to heal us, not destroy us; then of human repentance which is meant to restore us, not humiliate us. And then last week we spoke of the joy that comes with restored communion with God, and with each other.

So, what is there left to talk about?

Well, what is there to do? How are we meant to live?

We have heard two stories this morning about how to live.

In the first, we're taught how to live in 'real time' when we think we might know exactly what God wants from us.

In the second story, we're taught how to live in 'real time' when we think we might have nothing to offer to God.

David, the extraordinary young man of ancient Israel thought he might know exactly what God wanted from him.

Actually, he wasn't so young any more. But he had heard God's voice through the prophet Samuel when he was young. He had become a great warrior, and poet, and now a king, with the help of God. No one, within Israel or beyond its borders challenged him any longer. He was at his peak.

Surely God wanted him for all the power and wealth he now commanded. He would build a beautiful temple for God from scratch, so Israel would have for the Lord everything their pagan neighbours had for their gods.

Even Nathan the prophet, not known for going easy on royalty, was caught up in enthusiasm for the project: 'God, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.' But the Lord wasn't with him on this one, as Nathan found out in a dream that very night: 'Thus says the Lord...' No, you're not the one.'

It's not that the king didn't support the worship of God already. He was expected to and he did. There was a beautiful portable tabernacle that had first been built by Moses at the Lord's initiative generations before. David had offered many sacrifices from his possessions and given his resources up to honour God's name.

God wasn't saying I don't want your money or your art any more than God was saying I don't want your heart and soul. But God was saying something very clearly.

'So you want to build me a house? Have I ever asked for a house? Have I ever lived in a house? The time will come for a temple, but that won't be your doing.'

'But can I remind you of something? It is I, the Lord God, who is the creator, the builder. I have built and I am still building the whole house of Israel, and with it your own house, your own family dynasty.'

'I took you from the fields where you kept sheep, and made you a warrior, and a poet, and now a king. And I will take your son and make his kingdom and even greater kingdom.'

'Remember, David, my son, who is building for whom.'

God doesn't always want from us exactly what we think God wants. Sometimes, God simply wants us to know and feel how much God has given us.

That's why we need to celebrate, every week in worship, what God has done for us not what we have done for God.

And that's why we need to hear the prayer of thanksgiving at every Eucharist. Our approach to God always begins with the recollection of the divine gift of creation in God's image, and redemption by Christ, the Son of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit in building us back into that divine image.

How do we live? What are we meant to do in the final days of Advent?

We're taught how to live in 'real time' when we think we might know exactly what God wants from us. We're taught that the grace of God in our lives, at work in our parish is where we begin. We're asked to remember that God can't be paid back.

We're not taught to give less to the church for the honour of God and the good of our neighbour. We are taught to offer 'ourselves, our souls and bodies' in gratitude for what God has given us, and in the way that God desires in these days leading up to Christmas.

And this is where the story of the Annunciation takes us next, the story of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And we call her that because the Scripture call her blessed by God, reminds us that she was a virgin, a very young woman; and that she was named Mary.

It is a great pity that this great woman has sometimes generated controversy instead of inspired spiritual life.

She was certainly not seen as a mediator between God and humanity by our earliest Christian ancestors. That is the work of her Son and the Son of God, Jesus Christ, alone.

There is, in fact, a spiritual logic for many in asking both those saints (Christians) alive next to us in the pew and those alive with Christ in the next world, to pray for us who are still on this side of Glory. It is a logic that applies to the Blessed Virgin Mary especially. For many, though the whole idea is not quite convincing to me or to most Anglicans, or it would be in our Scriptures and in our liturgy.

The pity is that any of this should take us away from who Mary clearly is, in the Gospel this morning—a mortal like you and I, but a disciple whose hearing of God's voice is a model of spiritual faithfulness for all who have lived since.

What did Mary think she had to offer? In a way she was the opposite of David. She was from a little town, a tiny speck in the map of the mighty Roman Empire. She was a woman, and she was almost certainly quite young.

But in this second story, we're taught how to live in 'real time' with Mary, right when we think we might have nothing to offer to God.

The story begins with the ordinary facts of an ordinary betrothal, a normal stage of life. And in this unspectacular life, the voice of God is heard.

The first word to her is the first word to us: 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' These are the first words to her, because they are God's first words to all his creatures. They are words of eternal grace from a God who loves all whom God has made.

But she doesn't expect the words. They startle her because of how they are delivered. She is perplexed and fearful. Yet she listens, as we need to listen.

She hears the angel speak. God will be building David's house through her. And the way God will do it is through her child.

And she asks the question we all ask, when we really hear what God wants us to do: How can this be?

Now she, who had never slept with a man, was to become a mother; a unique event, to be sure.

But her question has echoed through history; 'How can this be'... since I am too young, or too old, or too poor, or not spiritual enough, or too messed up, or too busy, or too important, or too unimportant, or too untalented, or un-liked. How can this be?

How can I live in God's 'real time'. How can I help prepare this world for Christmas? David began with answers; Mary began with questions.

Our questions, like Mary's, are not brushed aside: 'The power of the most high will overshadow you.' Your cousin, Elizabeth, thought she'd never have a child. You thought you weren't ready for a child. You will both have children. Fear will give way as you begin to know that God's favour really is with you. Nothing is impossible for God who favours his people, whose first word is always 'grace'.

'Let it be with me according to your word'—the words for which Mary is most famous, words for us too.

And they were enough for God, whose Angel departed at these words of Mary.

She didn't really know how she would live till the birth of Christ, or after—except that God would never ask her to do something, or give something she was unable to do, or unable to give. It wasn't a matter of what she thought she had, but of the grace given to her and promised to her, and promised to you and to me.

The fourth day from today is Christmas, when we will light the Christ candle.

It will happen around the world, whether we are ready or not. But all of God's children are offered the chance to live in 'real time', whatever is happening in the malls or in our homes.

We're taught two things today.

We're taught how to live in 'real time' when we think we might know exactly what God wants from us.

In the second story, we're taught how to live in 'real time' when we think we might have nothing to offer to God.

And all of can hear God's voice and know how to live, if we begin with God's word to us in the Eucharist. Let's pray that we will hear God's voice—like David and Mary did. *Amen.*