

"The Salutation"

Luke 1:26-38

December 24, 2017

Advent 4

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed^(b) to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Dear Friends in Christ,

She's probably a young girl — fourteen, maybe fifteen, years old. Still young by our standards, though old enough to get married in her time. She's betrothed to Joseph and soon they will be fully man and wife. Mary's well-deserving; she's wise and devout, a maiden who has kept herself pure in her wait for marriage. She lives in a little town, far from where anything ever happens. Nazareth isn't exactly Jerusalem, you know. In Jerusalem, you have the king's palace and frequent visits from Roman commanders. You have the temple — the House of God — where God lives with His people in that Most Holy Place.

But there's none of this in Nazareth, that small town by the Sea of Galilee, a community with a reputation as glamorous as the drying fish netted the day before. She's a little girl in a little town, far away from where anything happens.

He's an extraordinary visitor with an extraordinary message. His name is Gabriel, and he is sent by God to a virgin betrothed to Joseph — a virgin named Mary in the little town of Nazareth. His extraordinary message begins like this: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women." That message brings an unusual reaction.

Read through the Scriptures, and you'll always find that people are troubled by the sight of angels. They shrink away or fall down on their faces and play dead; these heavenly messengers come straight from the glorious presence of God, and the righteousness that clings to them is enough to terrify sinners. Holy angels scare people.

Mary is troubled, but wait!: She is not troubled by Gabriel's appearance. She's troubled at his saying, and considers what manner of greeting this is. What is it that's so troubling for this devout maiden to hear? Is it "Rejoice"? Probably not. "Highly favored one"...that's a bit unusual and could leave her puzzled; so could "blessed are you among women." But troubled? For me, I'd guess that the most troubling part of the greeting is this: "The Lord is with you."

If it isn't troubling to her yet, it soon will be. How could the Lord be with Mary? I mean, He's everywhere — omnipresent, you know. But that sort of salutation means that He's not just present out there somewhere, but that He's present there to be found. Maybe seen. Witnessed,

somehow. "The Lord is with you" is the sort of thing you say to someone at the temple in Jerusalem, where God is dwelling behind the curtain. He's pointedly there. The Lord is with you at the temple because you've come to where the Lord promises to be. But this isn't Jerusalem and the temple. This is Nazareth and Mary's dwelling.

"The Lord be with you," says Gabriel — here and now. How could the Lord be with her? Gabriel fills in the blanks: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give 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." That's the message. Mary's going to be a mom.

Mary notes one obstacle to motherhood. It's not an doubt-filled objection, but a hindrance all the same: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Gabriel continues: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren." Ah, that answers that. Mary's going to be the mother of God.

You see, the angel isn't kidding when he says, "The Lord is with you." Gabriel isn't speaking in general terms, like, "Mary, I hope you know that the Lord has a special place for you in His heart." As the messenger of God, he is speaking God's specific, concrete, powerful Word. The Lord is with Mary, as really and as concretely as the cloud of glory that overshadowed the temple before descending into the Holy of Holies. He's with her, all right: By the Word of God that Gabriel proclaims, the power of the Highest overshadows her.

The Lord is with Mary: The Creator of heaven and earth is a single cell caught on the wall of her womb. He will divide into two cells, then four, then eight. He will develop a beating heart, head, fingers and toes. By the promise of God, Mary has received the body and blood of her Lord Jesus Christ. God has become man. The Word is made flesh to dwell among us. He will develop in Mary's womb until He is born in Bethlehem. He will be called the Son of God. It's just like the Lord promised long ago through His prophet Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). Immanuel.

When the Savior came, He would be called Immanuel, "God with us." No wonder Gabriel says to Mary, "The Lord is with you." Immanuel has arrived, as promised. Now, it's not going to be an easy life for Mary. She'll be the object of scorn, whether as the expectant mother or the grieving one entrusted to John at the foot of the cross. She'll be at the top of the devil's list; he's been waiting a few millennia for the Seed of the woman, and he will do his best to pierce her heart.

Still she says, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." It's a remarkable statement of faith, this acceptance of God's plan whatever the consequences. But faith is a gift of God, and she can make this confession because the Lord is with her. So here you are, last Sunday in Advent in Edmonton, Alberta. Great place to live, but not exactly New York or L.A. You might wish you were somewhere else, Cancun maybe, where the sunshine brings heat instead of mind-numbing cold. This is not the most glamorous spot in the world. But right here, a messenger of God makes an extraordinary declaration. No, he isn't an angel, just departed from the glorious throne of God; he's flesh and blood just like you, robed in a plain white alb to draw attention away from him to the Word of God he speaks. And the extraordinary Word that he says to you, again and again, is this: "The Lord be with you."

The Lord be with you: These are pretty much the same words that Gabriel spoke, that troubled Mary so. They may not trouble you at all. But if they don't trouble you, it may not be a good thing. It may not be a good thing because it's a symptom of the age in which we live. Contemporary religion doesn't like to be pinned down. On the one hand, forget laws about sin, right and wrong; those are too constricting. It's up to you to make up your own code of behavior, what is right and wrong for you personally.

On the other hand, keep God good and general and not-too-identified; that way, it's up to you to determine what He's like. It's also up to you to determine where He is for you. So, if you say "The Lord be with you" to your average somewhat-spiritual person, they will respond, "I know that. I know he's here." But if you ask them to point, specifically, to where He is, you might get a funny look. God is considered to be very abstract and vague these days. This is not at all what these words mean when you hear them from your pastor. "The Lord be with you" is not a wish, but a statement of awesome truth: The Lord is with you. Concretely, bodily with you. He is as with you here and now as He was with Mary as He developed in her womb. He is located, findable, here. With you.

The Word made flesh dwells among you; where the Word is proclaimed, the Word is present. The Son of the Highest, who stood His body in the Jordan river to be baptized by John, is present in the Sacrament of Baptism — where you are washed clean by water and...the Word. The Son of God is present at the Lord's Supper, saying, "Take and eat, this is My body...take and drink, this is My blood, for the forgiveness of sins." The Lord is with you, and you can point to Him. Where? Point to the words of Absolution coming out of the pastor's mouth. Point to the font. Point to the lecturn and the pulpit. Point to the altar. Where the Word is proclaimed, that's where the Word-made-flesh is present.

And do not worry that you can't see Him. Those who journeyed to the temple in Jerusalem could not look behind the curtain, but that did not mean that He was absent. Those who watched Mary's belly grow couldn't see that the Baby was the Son of God, but He was all the same. You've got something better than what your eyes see: You've got His promises. He is with you as really and bodily as He was with the virgin Mary. This means, of course, that you will

hear the same objections that Mary likely heard. Even from fellow Christians, you will hear the "reason rules religion" argument: "Jesus can't be present in water or bread or wine. Why? Because logically the finite can't contain the infinite. It doesn't make sense. You can't put the infinite God in an inch-wide, paper-thin wafer of bread. God is God and bread is bread, Creator and created thing; they don't mix. Don't look for Jesus in those Sacraments; look for Him in your heart."

To this we respond with the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary: "With God nothing will be impossible." The Lord who is with Mary as a microscopic, fertilized cell in her womb is certainly capable of being with you in Word and water, bread and wine. Let us not impose our puny limitations upon the almighty Lord. We might caution as well that we rejoice with those who say that they have Jesus in their heart; but how did He get there? How did He come to be with you there if not by His means of grace?

Even so, you must face the practical objections which the world throws your way. This world is about power, taking care of yourself, covering up faults and moving on to success; but you go and confess your sins, and then hear words of Absolution, believing that Jesus is there to forgive you. This world is about impressing people, gaining favor with people and quid pro quos; but you keep thinking back upon your Baptism, where Jesus washed you with water and His Word, cleansing you of your sin and making you His child. This world is about health and pleasure, free time and toys; but you quietly come forward, kneel down, and receive bread and wine — because you believe the Scriptures when they tell you that Jesus is there with you, for the forgiveness of sins.

The world will voice all sorts of objections to spending time on Word and Sacrament, because these means of grace will not help you get ahead in this world. But then again, no one ever said that they would. They're not about getting ahead in the world. You receive these things because there is more to life than this world which does not know God. Baptism may not win favor with others; but the Lord of heaven and earth says, "You are now My beloved child." Confession and Absolution won't prove your strength to a world that doesn't want to admit fault; but by it the Lord says, "You are now faultless to stand before Me." Holy Communion will not improve your health or fitness or beauty in this life; but by the grace given there, you will live forever.

Why do these means of grace impart such astounding blessings? Because in them Jesus is there, present. With you. For you. Tonight, Christmas Eve, we will peer with wonder into the manger at Bethlehem, point to the Baby and say, "Behold the Son of God, present with His people." This is indeed a great and mighty wonder; rejoice that this miracle is continued wherever His Word is preached and His Sacraments administered according to His Word. By these means of grace, the Lord is with you — just as much as He was with Mary. And because the Lord is with you, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen