

Sermon for 4 Advent, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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In our Old Testament reading, the Lord says to David the shepherd king, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” Of course, in the next generation, Solomon the son of David begins well, but finishes by building temples to pagan idols. His sons split the kingdom in two, and the northern kingdom of Israel never does recover to serve God. They are wiped out by the Assyrians.

The southern kingdom of Judah does a little better. Out of 20 rulers, perhaps two are reasonably faithful to God. And even Judah is eventually overcome by the unfaithfulness of the people. This is the kingdom which is taken into exile in Babylon, after it replaces Assyria as the dominant world power. All in all, not a very good run for a dynasty established by God himself.

But all is not lost. There is a return from the exile. Most did not return. But a few pious Jews came back to settle in the land and suffer rank poverty while trying to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. They were encouraged in these endeavors by the last few prophets. But a couple of generations later, even the descendants of these few were once again falling away from the Lord and taking up pagan ways. After the exile, there were always a few who tried to remain faithful to God and his Law. But from this point on, there was no prophecy. God had said all he had to say for about 400 years.

There was never a full restoration of the Davidic kingdom of Israel. Judea remained a province of Babylon, and then a province of Persia, and then a province of the Greek empire of Alexander the Great. When Alexander died, he divided his empire among four of his favorite generals, who then founded their own dynasties and fought with each other. As it happened, Judea found itself ruled first by the Greek Ptolemies of Egypt, and then by the Greek Seleucids of Syria.

After the Syrians took over, they tried to stamp out the Jewish religion, even going so far as to desecrate the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar in honor of a pagan idol. This produced a revolt led by a priestly family, usually known by their nickname, Maccabeus, or “the hammer”. The Maccabees were able to reestablish a Jewish state and rule it for about a hundred years. But it was never really independent; because, by that time, Rome was beginning to dominate the entire world as no one had ever done before.

By the time of the New Testament, there has been no new prophecy for about 400 years. The mantle of the zealous Maccabees has passed by marriage and Roman politics to an Idumean named Herod. Although he pretends to be a Jew, he is really a descendant of Esau rather than Jacob. There are various Jewish parties vying for influence among the people, with various degrees of faithfulness and religious fervor. Some of them hate Rome, and some of them love Rome. But in spite of Jewish pretensions, Rome is really in control. High culture is Greek culture. And the throne that God said he would establish for ever has not been occupied for over 500 years.

But even now, the descendants of David know who they are. One has to keep body and soul together, so those of David's house take humble middle class occupations. Like a builder, say; a carpenter. And the people look for the shadowy figure from the Old Testament writings, God's anointed king, the Messiah. A son of David will reign over them again. God promised. But who and when? The prophets seem to indicate that the time is near.

It is into this confusion and desolation and apprehension that God finally speaks, breaking a silence of over 400 years. The angel Gabriel comes first to Zechariah to announce the conception of John, and then to a girl in some backwater northern town, engaged to marry some contractor, whose only claim to fame is that he is descended, father to son, from King David.

It seems that Mary was one of the few who were not confused or troubled. She knew her faith. She prayed. She loved God. It is the visit of the angel that disturbs her simple, straightforward life. Because angels are disturbing. They don't give you a nice warm fuzzy feeling. They're terrifying. The first words of an angel to a human person are usually, "Don't be afraid!" But Mary has to endure a greeting prior to this: "Rejoice, blessed one! The Lord is with you." Then he tells her not to be afraid. Then he tells her she will be the mother of the Messiah and that the child will have no biological father, and that God is all-powerful. None of it very soothing news.

And here is the hinge of salvation history. God has been working quietly up to this point for thousands of years. He's set it all up. He finally breaks his silence to speak to this girl. And it's up to her. No doubt if she refuses the calling, God will find another way to accomplish his will. Mary cannot ultimately thwart the creator of the universe. And yet, at this moment, everything comes down to the choice of this girl.

And indeed, the angel has it right. She is blessed. Her next words are a confirmation of that fact. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” That sounds so nice, doesn’t it? Handmaid. But it’s not what she says. She says, “Behold the slave of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” She has just given up her own will to God’s. God has blessed her with the ability to renounce her own desires completely and open herself up to the terrifying reality of his will. She has accepted the social consequences of conceiving a child before she is married, the responsibility of raising him, the pain of giving him up to death. She has, in a way, given herself for crucifixion, though she probably does not yet understand that fully.

From the seed of this moment the church grows. Joseph too will accept the pain and responsibility, will open himself to God’s will. The disciples of Jesus, the apostles and martyrs, all will follow in her footsteps. He who cannot be contained has emptied himself to be contained in the womb of this blessed girl, Mary. And the world will never be the same. Those who follow him must make the same response that Mary did. “Behold the slave of the Lord. Let my life be as God says it shall be, regardless of the consequences.”

He is coming. He is coming to fulfill his promise. The throne of David is restored, but not in the way that most people expected. The Son of David rules even now in the hearts of men and women throughout the world. And his invitation is open to all. “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. And he has a marvelous plan for you.” Now the hinge of history is in your hands. Will you accept God’s will instead of your own? Can you say with the Church throughout the ages, “Behold the servant of the Lord. May it be with me according to his will.”?