

DECEMBER 14, 2014: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 I Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

One of the reasons John originally composed his gospel was to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. If he had music playing the background as he wrote, it probably would be that well-known song from *Annie Get Your Gun*: “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.” As we hear in today’s gospel pericope, he states his thesis in his very first chapter.

John the Baptizer is John the Evangelist’s spokesperson. Though sent from God, this wilderness prophet isn’t the light people were expecting. He’s simply on the scene “to testify to the light.” Neither is he the Messiah. He’s just “the voice of one crying out in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord.” Even when it comes to his trademark baptism, he’s convinced there’s a better baptism around the corner.

That logically leads us to the question of the day: how is Christianity superior to Judaism?

It’s essential to remember that Jesus’ original followers committed themselves to imitating his death and resurrection not because they wanted to get into heaven – the rich young man narrative in Mark 10 teaches that they could have accomplished that feat by just keeping the commandments – but because they experienced a more meaningful and fulfilling life by becoming other Christs.

This Galilean carpenter had discovered that the most important element in achieving a meaningful and fulfilling life was the ability to surface the kingdom of God permeating all we do. He not only believed that God’s working effectively in our daily lives, but he also was convinced that if we rearrange our value system, we can actually experience God’s presence. He didn’t proclaim this kind of repentance for repentance sake, but because it was the only way to become part of God’s kingdom. Only when people become more important than institutions, more valuable than rules and regulations will we even notice God’s presence in all we encounter and in all we do.

Paul’s community in Thessalonica has already traveled a long way down the road that leads to that goal. We presume they’re praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances, rejoicing in the Spirit’s gifts, and listening to the prophets in their midst. Day by day they’re becoming more holy – more “other.” They stand in contrast to others around them, to those who have yet to repent.

It’s clear from this earliest Christian writing we possess that Jesus’ first and second generation followers expected his Second Coming to take place in their lifetime. Though later generations had to adjust to his delayed Parousia, they gradually began to discover that the God working effectively among them was actually the risen Jesus; an experience which made their transition from “short-term” to “long-term” Christians much easier to accomplish. As often happens to all of us, what we once thought to be something in the future is actually here right now, if we just know what to look for.

No wonder Luke’s Jesus zeroes in on today’s Third-Isaiah pericope when he’s given the Scripture scroll to read in his hometown synagogue. Because of his belief in God’s kingdom among us he certainly conceives of his itinerant preaching ministry as a way to bring glad tidings to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. What he says and what he does frees people from the restrictions which make their lives unfulfilling and meaningless.

Pope Francis certainly hit the theological nail on the head when he insisted that some church leaders should stop being “sourpusses.” Could he have been implying that some of the key people in our Christian communities have yet to hear and proclaim Jesus’ good news; that they’ve yet to repent?

DECEMBER 21, 2014: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
II Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a16 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

Biblical faith rarely revolves around what we can do for God. Our sacred authors are much more concerned with reminding us about the things God has done and will do for us. That's certainly the case with today's three inspired writers.

Nathan, for instance, dead-ends David's plans to build a house for Yahweh by simply reminding him about God's plan to build a house for him. "When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I (Yahweh) will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me: your throne shall stand firm forever." Yahweh's relationship with David's family will last longer than any building constructed to honor God.

In a similar way, Paul ends his letter to the Romans by reminding his readers that God is the one force in their lives who constantly "strengthens" them. It's through their imitation of Jesus' dying and rising – this "mystery kept secret for long ages" – that they're able to experience a strengthening God entering and working effectively in their daily lives.

That's why Luke makes a big thing about Jesus' conception. Though Scripture scholars like Raymond Brown have consistently warned us not to take such biblical annunciations literally, we should never overlook the messages those unique narratives convey. We actually have three gospel annunciations pertaining to Jesus. Today's Lucan annunciation to Mary is by far the best known. But, we shouldn't overlook the other two: Matthew's chapter 1 annunciation to Joseph, and Mark's baptismal annunciation to Jesus. In each passage, the evangelist is concerned with conveying one or more theological insights into Jesus' personality and ministry.

Luke accomplishes this in several ways. No one can overlook Gabriel's statement, "The child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." Nothing could be clearer. But even his future name – Jesus – is significant. It's easy to forget that the historical Mary never actually called her son Jesus. She never spoke Greek. She would have employed his original Hebrew name "*Joshua*." The "*Jo*" is an oft-used biblical abbreviation for Yahweh; "*shua*" means saves. Whenever Mary called Jesus for supper, she was proclaiming her belief that Yahweh is constantly saving us – a very significant proclamation of faith when it's directed to this specific Joshua.

But even the first words of the angel's encounter with the virgin are theologically significant. Luke employs the Greek word "*kecharitomene*" when he speaks about Mary – a word modern English translations (including the Catholic New American Bible) render as "highly favored one." But because some of the first English translations of the Christian Scriptures came from the Latin Vulgate and not the original Greek, we're accustomed to hearing Mary referred to as "full of grace." ("*Gratia plena*" is how St. Jerome originally rendered the angel's greeting.)

Without any reference to Mary's Immaculate Conception, Luke just seems to be saying, "This is your lucky day, Mary! If I were you I'd buy a lottery ticket!" This wonderful thing is happening in Mary's life, not because of anything she did, or anything that happened to her prior to this annunciation, but simply because God chose to make her an instrument of Yahweh's salvation.

Hearing these words, the evangelist's community would have reflected on how they, as other Christs, were also instruments in Yahweh's salvation. They hadn't forced God to include them in his/her plans. Their relationship with the risen Jesus was God's free gift. It wasn't given them because of their good looks, their deep spirituality, or because they'd do a better job than anyone else carrying on Jesus' ministry.

They, like Mary, were simply *kecharitomene*.

COPYRIGHT 2014 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN