

DECEMBER 18, 2011: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
II Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a-16 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

Paul sets the theme for today's readings. The Apostle ends his letter to the Romans by thanking God for letting him and "all the nations" in on a "secret." By imitating Jesus' dying and rising one not only finds true fulfillment in life, but will also inherit eternal life. This is "the mystery kept secret for long ages"

One of the deepest dimensions of biblical faith is the conviction that there's always "more out there" than we can perceive right here and now. Mysterious things are not only happening, somehow, we're part of them.

David's memorable conversation with the prophet Nathan demonstrates the point. The king's concerned to fulfill his obligation to take care of the ark of God: the mobile shrine which symbolizes the presence of Yahweh among Yahweh's people. Unlike most nations in the ancient Middle-East, Israel has no house - no temple - for its God. "Here am I living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent."

The irony of the king's determination to build Yahweh a house is that Yahweh is planning to build David a house - a family dynasty. The prophet announces, "Yahweh will establish a house for you." Not a building to live in, but descendants who will be on the Jewish throne for many generations. "When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I (Yahweh) will raise up your heir after you . . . And I will make his kingdom firm. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever."

Like all people of biblical faith, David learns God constantly leads us beyond the limits that faith imposes. That's why it's important to remember something the late Raymond Brown always stressed. "Biblical annunciations are narrated by the sacred authors for the sake of their readers, not for the ones receiving the annunciation." Along with other scholars, Fr. Brown was convinced such passages were literary devices which the writers employed to help us understand the meaning of what was happening in the text. He presumed the actual recipients of biblical annunciations only surfaced the meaning the angel supplied long after the biblical scene. In other words, though Luke tells us today - at the beginning of his gospel - who Mary's child is and will be, the historical Mary might not have discovered these things until many years later when she reflected on the implications of her son's resurrection. During his life on earth, Jesus probably was a mystery to his own mother. (Remember Mary and Joseph's anxiety when the child Jesus goes missing for three days. Obviously the source Luke employs for his lost-in-the-temple passage knows nothing of Luke's annunciation to Mary or Matthew's annunciation to Joseph.)

Like all of us, Mary could easily have had to live a lifetime in faith, constantly discovering the different directions into which God was leading her, over and over again learning how God was part of her life and deeper dimensions of the relationship she had formed with others, even her own son.

Mary would never have imagined what God had in mind for her before it actually began to unfold. At no point of her education in the faith would such a "mystery" have surfaced. It's only revealed over a period of time. That's why Luke ends his annunciation pericope with Mary's well-known statement: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." For Luke, the perfect disciple is the man or woman who first hears God's word, then carries it out. I presume God's word will come for most of us not in an angelic annunciation but in the ways God enters our everyday lives.

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DECEMBER 25, 2011: CHRISTMAS
(Eucharist During the Day) Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-6 John 1:1-8

Though Easter is an infinitely more significant feast than Christmas, celebrating Jesus' birth does offer some important insights into our faith. Among other things, it forces us to zero in on Jesus being one of us. If we buy into John's theology, this Galilean carpenter existed as God from all eternity, but at one point in our history he agreed to come to earth and share our human condition. That's why it might be helpful today to examine the human condition which Jesus made his own; a condition which longed for a change, else Jesus' arrival wouldn't have been necessary.

Scholars agree that John the Evangelist basically got his idea about Jesus being the Word of God from the oracles of Deutero-Isaiah, an unnamed prophet active during Israel's 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile: until the Holocaust, the darkest period in Jewish history. The captives were completely helpless. There was no way out. Never again would they see the Holy Land.

Then Deutero-Isaiah arrives, preaching a message at right angles to what the Chosen People expected. No longer was Yahweh angry with them. On the contrary, as the first lines of chapter 40 announce, they were to prepare for a return to Israel. God was going to lead them home. Those in exile had just one problem: how could the prophet be certain about this? Where's the proof that Yahweh will carry through on such good news?

The prophet's answer is classic: We have Yahweh's word on it! Deutero-Isaiah's convinced that once God speaks God's word, that word has an effect. It actually happens. In this case, if Yahweh says we're going home, then start packing. That conviction is the basis for today's first reading. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, 'Your God is King!'"

It not a surprise to biblically-formed people that God's word constantly breaks into their lives. The Hebrews' author begins his work by reminding his audience, "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets" But then, as a follower of Jesus, he brings up the basic tenet of all Christian faith. ". . . In these last days he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being"

It doesn't take much for John to take the next theological step. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Like Deutero-Isaiah's word of Yahweh, Jesus is the "... light (shining) in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." By choosing to come on earth, Jesus chose to be God's effective word among us. What he announces about God, he is.

No matter the perks which organized religion can and does provide, our human condition still demands God's word. It alone gives hope in the midst of our hopelessness; it's the force driving us to look beyond the limited horizon which our limited human nature projects; a light in an otherwise dark world.

Deutero-Isaiah and Jesus brought good news only because both were so immersed in our humanity that they knew what we really needed. But there's a "kicker" to this word stuff. As John puts it, "To those who did accept him (Jesus) he gave power to become children of God" Just as Jesus, the son of God, brings God's word to this world, so we, the children of God are obligated to share that same word. The helpless who inhabit our environment should be able to expect our feet to be just as beautiful as those of Deutero-Isaiah and Jesus.

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