

DECEMBER 20TH, 2020: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

II Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

I presume we're all doing a lot of gawking at Christmas decorations on this last day before Christmas. Places that were rather plain a couple days ago have been beautifully gussied up for our annual celebration. Of course, we'd better "look quick;" some decorations – especially the commercial ones - will be gone in less than 48 hours. That's what happens when one gets involved only with the externals of things. Fortunately our faith revolves around internals, especially our own internals.

In a sense, David discovers this in today's first reading. As king, he can change a lot of things. One thing he's planning to change is the place where the Ark of the Covenant resides. Over 3,000 years ago that famous mobile shrine was housed in a tent.

That wasn't by accident. As I just mentioned, the Ark was built to be movable, available at a moment's notice to be carried wherever needed. Sporting poles along each side for easy transporting, it never was intended to be "put in concrete." Yet, until Nathan the prophet shows up, that's precisely what David plans to do.

Nathan informs him that Yahweh's more intent on building David and his family into a "house" than in dealing with the externals of where God's shrine resides. Yahweh wants to change people not buildings, no matter how easy it is to measure one's faith by the number and size of the latter.

Paul, convinced the "obedience of faith" is why Jesus originally came among us, certainly didn't have buildings in mind when he ended his letter to the Romans with today's well-known doxology. The faith of the risen Jesus revolves around how we remake ourselves, not our physical environment.

No gospel person, except Jesus, does this better than Mary of Nazareth. Through the centuries we've created apocryphal gospels that have made her a saint from birth, and even proclaimed doctrines which have her immaculately conceived. Yet our evangelists never attach such a pre-existing personality to her. Luke gives her just one unique characteristic: she hears God's word and carries it out.

That characteristic doesn't seem to have been something she perfectly had from her conception. I presume, like all of us, she had to grow into such a frame of mind. But she certainly developed that quality deeply enough that she was open to God working in her life even in the unique situation of discovering she was virginally pregnant.

Of course, we presume after Gabriel's visit, who wouldn't do what God wanted? She didn't have a choice.

Just one problem: I don't know any Scripture scholar who takes angelic annunciations literally. Every serious student of Scripture realizes angelic encounters are literary devices which our sacred authors employ to help us understand the meaning of certain events. Annunciations are for our sake, not for the sake of the biblical people who receive them.

We presume it took the historical Mary – and Joseph - a long time to understand her pregnancy's significance. The actual realization of that event most probably didn't happen until years down the road. Perhaps only after Jesus' resurrection! (In the meantime, I can only imagine the pair's table talk!)

It's easy to focus on externals; much more difficult and complicated to alter what's down deep inside us. Jesus of Nazareth's ministry taught us that faith revolves around the latter. Nothing else is worth our time and effort.

The late Cardinal John Wright once asked, "What would happen if we simultaneously destroyed every church-owned building? What would we do? What would become of our faith?"

At that point we might actually discover in what listening to God's word and carrying it out really consists. If nothing else, it would certainly hasten the process.

DECEMBER 25TH, 2020: CHRISTMAS

Eucharist During the Day

Isaiah 52:7-10 Hebrews 1:1-6 John 1:1-18

No matter how much I try to put it out of my mind, I frequently think of “White Christmas” today; not because I’m sentimental about old-time Christmas songs, but because I teach Scripture. I often use it as an example in my courses.

Few noticed the song when Bing Crosby first sang it on his Christmas radio show in 1941, nor when it was put into the 1942 movie *Holiday Inn*. According to music historians, it only took off because so many soldiers were away from home at Christmas during World War II. As the war went on, its popularity continued to grow. Twelve years later a movie was made named *White Christmas*, and by now, it’s the number one best-selling song of all time. We only go back to its origins today because of its later history. Its eventual importance transformed the way we look at its beginning.

In many ways, the same thing happened to Jesus of Nazareth. We wouldn’t be celebrating Christmas today if he hadn’t eventually risen from the dead. Though we don’t have as many days off from school for Easter as we do for Christmas, there’s no way Christmas is as important for Christians as Easter. Jesus’ birth wasn’t even celebrated in the church for the first several centuries. (On the other hand, I presume Easter was commemorated the first year after the initial event.) December 25 was chosen not because it’s the actual date of his birth, but because of the later Roman pagan practices the church was trying to replace at the time. I won’t even get into the non-Christian origins of Christmas trees, lights, exchanging gifts and mistletoe. About the only specifically Christian tradition we have is Francis of Assisi’s Christmas crib, and it took almost 1,200 years for that to come into existence.

The problem is that Christmas without Jesus’ dying and rising isn’t a Christian feast; we’re forgetting what happened in order to make Jesus’ birth exceptional. Many of us can sympathize with a baby born in difficult circumstances, but never look at that baby as more than a baby, rarely noticing how his eventual dying and rising demands we also imitate his death and resurrection.

We can certainly echo Deutero-Isaiah’s proclamation that the feet of one who brings glad tidings are beautiful, but if we’re followers of Jesus of Nazareth, our initial faith proclamation has nothing to do with Christmas, but with Easter. Our ancestors in the faith became conscious of his death and resurrection long before they even thought about his birth. His dying and rising are the glad tidings they handed down to us.

In his famous book, *The Birth of the Messiah*, the late Raymond Brown is careful to explain Jesus’ “messianic moment:” the point at which Jesus actually became God. Most modern Christians follow the theology John puts forth in today’s gospel. Jesus is God from all eternity. The Word exists “from the beginning.” Our only question revolves around when that divine person became “flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

But, as Brown points out, a belief in Jesus’ preexistence as God only develops toward the end of the first century. Before then, beginning with Paul, who in Romans 1 seems to contend Jesus became God when his Father raised him from the dead, our sacred authors have different opinions, opinions I don’t have time or space to explore. Yet today it’s enough simply to know Jesus’ birth is a lot more complicated than just staging a grade school Christmas play. As the author of Hebrews states, God has spoken to us through “partial and various ways.” Perhaps even through a process similar to how Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” became the all-time best seller.