

4 Advent, Yr. B

December 13, 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11. 16, Canticle 15, Luke 1:26-38

Let me begin by saying that some of the themes in these scriptures will be carried over to the Christmas sermon. I hesitate to sound like a commercial for an on-going TV series, but there you have it. So, stay tuned!

Last Sunday, the collect asked God to “stir up” his power and come among us. That prayer goes along with a reading from Isaiah that we heard earlier in Advent: O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN, SO THAT THE MOUNTAINS WOULD SHAKE AT YOUR PRESENCE.

That’s typical apocalyptic thinking – and perhaps there’s a part of each of us that looks out at the mess of the world and thinks that only God can straighten it all out and wishes that he would just get on with it. And that part of us probably thinks that if he would indeed tear open the heavens and have the mountains quaking, at least that kind of presence, that kind of power, would be understood. There wouldn’t be any ambiguity in that kind of message. Isn’t there something kind of desirable in that kind of power? And wouldn’t we like to have it? To use for our own purposes?

On one level, that kind of power is what the first reading, the one from Samuel, is about. David is consolidating his political power. Just before this, he had established a new city, the city of Jerusalem, and he also recovered the Ark of the Covenant.

Both of those are powerful guarantees of God's presence with the Israelites, but, besides that, they were ways for David to legitimize his rule. In this reading, David has thought of something else. Perhaps, he thinks, I should build God a house, a temple. Scholars note that there are at least two things going on here simultaneously – one has to do with a genuine piety, because David does love God, and the other with political power. Israel always desired guarantees of God's presence with them. And they had had it – in the cloud and pillar of fire and in the ark. But, thinks David, a house, a temple – that would be more solid, more permanent. Interesting, don't you think, that God says no? "I'VE NEVER ASKED FOR A HOUSE OF CEDAR. I HAVE MOVED AMONG MY PEOPLE. I'M FREE TO GO WHERE I WILL. I HAVE MY OWN PLAN.

So, insofar as David would like to pin God down, to force God to remain with Israel, in effect to control God, it isn't going to work. But then God goes further – I don't want or need that kind of house, he says, but I will make YOU a house, so that your "house," your descendants, your kingdom, will be forever.

One thing to note is that this plays into the messianic idea. From this promise of God, the idea arose that a descendant of David would come, one who would finally make things right. Over the centuries, the idea took a number of forms, the most prominent of which was that this messiah would come from the house of David and, like him, would be a great King, unifying the country and restoring its former glory.

But once again, the human plan, the human idea of power and how it should work, gets trumped by God's plan. In today's Gospel, we see that plan coming to fruition, picking up so many years later. But there are no trumpets, no great armies, no military trappings. Instead, an angel, a messenger from God, appears to a young woman, hardly more than a girl, in a backwater village in Galilee. He calls her "favored one," and tells her that the Lord is with her. He also tells her not to be afraid. And then he lays out God's plan – he announces that Mary has found favor with God and that she will bear a son to be named Jesus, who will have the throne of his ancestor David and that the kingdom he establishes will never end.

The scene is far from the kind of power that could tear open the heavens. In fact, while it's always called The Annunciation, and while it seems that that angel is announcing, not asking, in this dialogue, you'll note the silence in which Mary ponders how to respond. Perhaps this would be better called the Invitation. Because this adventure isn't going to be forced on Mary. She has to agree. Someone has said that the great angel himself stood in that silence and trembled, both while he awaited her answer but also perhaps at the frailty of the plan itself. DON'T BE AFRAID he says to her, to this girl, hardly more than a child herself. But there's a lot to be afraid of – does Mary think about her unmarried status, or about what Joseph's reaction is going to be? About how it's going to be talked about in the village? Does she foresee giving birth so far from home with only a stable for shelter? Is there any way she would know

that she and Joseph and the child would become refugees to Egypt shortly after the birth, trying to save the child from the wrath of a paranoid king? Can she possibly know that her son will become a controversial teacher, that he will receive abuse and threats from both the political and religious leaders of the country? And does she know that she will hold his crucified body in her arms? I'm guessing she knows none of this. When I was growing up, the devotions to Mary always showed her as submissive, but I would point out that she must have been unbelievably strong as well as deeply trusting. There is nothing in the texts to show that another angel ever appeared to reiterate this first message, that God is with her, or to explain what God's plan really was, or to give the comfort that the Resurrection would be the final chapter.

One wonders if she could have said no. And I think that was certainly a possibility. But what she said was "yes, here I am."

I think of these texts and think that we too are being asked to say "yes." We're being asked to bring Christ into the world again and again. We maybe don't have a messenger like Gabriel, who's often pictured glowing and with great wings. But I suggest that God sends each of us messengers as well. Who of us hasn't had an experience of this: maybe a quiet word at just the right time, or a person showing up just when you need them, or someone walking with you during a tough time, or some opportunity to do good, to make a difference, showing up at an opportune moment. When that happens, and

I suspect it happens much more often than we think, we have a choice. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about this and suggests that, while it would be pretty hard to say no to someone like Gabriel, she says that we can, simply say no by just dropping our eyes and refusing to look up until you know that the angel has left the room and you are alone again.

I know that over the last several weeks, I have asked you to think about where you see the Kingdom breaking in. Today, I'd invite you to think about all the ways in which angels appear in your life. I'd like to close by sharing an experience I had. I was in Seattle at the time, wrestling with a call to ministry. I had left the law practice and was "trying doors" but none of them seemed to open. I was walking one day when a fellow fell into step beside me. He offered to sell me a bracelet that he had made. He went on to say that he was homeless and he told me a bit of what that was like, including the fact that he only slept in the "better" neighborhoods. He also said that he really hated those soup kitchens where they made you pray before eating, as though prayer was a form of payment in advance. At some point, we got around to me and what I was doing and I told him I was trying to figure out a ministry. "You mean like that stuff in the Gospel?" he asked." "Yes, like that," I replied. "You really believe that," was the next question. "Yes," I said, "I guess I really do." And he looked me in the eye and said, "That's good." And then, "I turn off here." And he walked away. When I turned to see where he had gone, I couldn't see him anywhere. An angel? Who knows. But he provided a

blessing and affirmation when I most needed it. So, for now, while looking at places where the kingdom is breaking in, please add the blessed and joyful task of watching for angels. Amen.