Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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Scripture scholar and Blessed Sacrament Fr. Eugene LaVerdiere used to describe the scene in which the angel Gabriel seeks and speaks to Mary as one that could be played out spectacularly on film. It begins with a panoramic view of the world that solemnly zooms in and spotlights one tiny place. We could imagine the overture from the film score to *The Mission* behind Google Earth images slowly moving in from the vastness of space, to this planet and then the Middle East. It slowly focuses on a little area along the eastern Mediterranean where it looks like a couple of lakes are connected by a river. Eventually the focus comes down to a particular part of the earth and the sea and river disappear. All we see is a dusty, little town and finally one young woman, presumably going about her everyday business.

That's how Luke introduces the story of the angel's encounter with Mary. It begins in heaven, the angels' abode with God. Then, reminding us of the history and the land of Israel, Luke focuses not on Jerusalem, the great city of the Temple, but on the backwater town of Nazareth in Galilee. Passing by any and everybody considered to be important, Luke then highlights one young woman.

As Emily Dickinson would say, she's nobody. Barely more than a child, she's nobody's wife and nobody's mother. But God's angel lands in front of her. There, in the middle of nowhere, the angel addresses the young woman, a societal nobody.

The angel asks her to agree to God's plan to change everything. This is the mystery we are invited to contemplate as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas.

As we hear the closing words of his letter to the Romans today, Paul explains that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to bring the entire world to the obedience of faith. In order to understand that, we need to know what obedience meant in Paul's vocabulary. Obedience is a word for listening. It implies listening so carefully, so attentively, so openly, that the listeners are prepared to be changed by what they hear. Getting people to listen is ultimately the only way to bring about change. Law may be imposed on people. But if they don't internalize the law, if they don't choose it as a good way to act, it is only as effective as the penalties for infractions are painful and unavoidable. Paul believed that the mystery of Christ was a mystery so exciting and life-giving that it would bring people to obedience — if only they would listen to it with their heart.

Mary listened to the angel. She allowed her heart to be vulnerable to God's grace, which is another way of saying she was obedient. She wasn't passive, she clearly explained why the plan seemed impossible — she was nobody, only betrothed, not yet even a real wife. But she was simple enough, open enough, to hear that God's plan was bigger than her expectations or even her imagination. When the Holy Spirit is allowed on the scene, nothing is impossible.

This year we have the shortest Advent season possible. Our last week of Advent can begin no earlier than the first anticipated Mass on Saturday afternoon and it will come to an end with the first Mass of Christmas Eve on Sunday afternoon. This "week" of 24 hours or less seems to be a trick of liturgical time. Perhaps it's also a reminder that God doesn't wear a watch or carry a Day-Timer. God's time is as different from ours as God's thoughts are bigger than our imaginations. Only God would dream up a plan to save the world by starting with young Mary of Nazareth. Only God would keep turning to us, hoping for obedience.

The angel said to Mary, "The Lord is with you." The angel also said, "Do not be afraid." The message that God is with us can be very troubling. If we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to God's presence, everything can change and that's not always comforting.

The message we are invited to ponder today during this 24-hour, final week of Advent, is that the Creator of the universe wants to be with us. When we are invited

to ponder all that could be, the angel reminds us “nothing will be impossible for God.” The mystery of Christmas that we celebrate with lights and crèche scenes, gifts and shared food, is not just a historical commemoration. Luke wants us to listen for Gabriel’s wings approaching our town. The angels will tell us, “Do not be afraid.” Heaven is hoping we will respond with the obedience of faith.

2 SAMUEL 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

This reading opens with David taking a time of Sabbath-style leisure and contemplating all that has happened in his young life. We can picture him enjoying a sense of peace and contentment. Knowing that David was the reputed composer of the Book of Psalms, we might picture him with lyre in hand, creating poetry and melody to express his heart’s sentiment: “How can I repay the Lord for all the great good done for me?” (Psalm 116). Singing this prayer gives him an inspiration. He decides that he should muster his forces to build a temple, a place for God to dwell. Even Nathan, the prophet, thinks it’s a good idea — at least until he had time to sleep on it.

God is the one who isn’t convinced about the business of building a temple. Was the problem that David was taking things into his own hands? Was the temple an attempt to try to hem in God’s unruly presence? Perhaps God knew that focus on a temple could blind people to God’s other ways of being with them. In 1 Chronicles 22, David confessed to his son Solomon that he had shed too much blood to be worthy to build a temple. Another motive might have had to do with the question of keeping David from getting lost on an ego trip: If he built a temple, he might become famous for what he did for God instead of being known for what God had done for him. There were plenty of reasons for God to say “No.”

Whatever the underlying rationale, God sent Nathan back to David to tell him to stop drawing up the blueprints and take time to ponder what God had in mind for him. In the speech Nathan gave David, he almost seemed to recite David’s curriculum vitae, except that God got the credit for every good turn in David’s life. What really happened in the back and forth was that God reiterated their history together and made more promises to David.

This brings us to the focus this reading offers for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. The point is not what David would do for God, but what God would do for David, and therefore for all of David’s people. Scholars tell us that this reading marks a turning

point in the history presented by the Hebrew Scriptures. The promise God makes to David echoes the covenant God made with Abraham. God turns the tables on David, God shows David that he can never repay God and that God intends to do still more for him. God will not simply make David famous, but give him an heir whose kingdom will endure forever.

There is a subtle strain of incarnational theology running through this incident. David wishes to formalize worship, to build a place of encounter with God. God replies that it is not a house, but a kingdom, a people united, that will show forth God's glory. Yes, Solomon will build a temple — but it is one that is destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed. What God was really building up in this people was a way to dwell among them, to bring them into what Jesus would describe as the kingdom of God.

ROMANS 16:25-27

This very long sentence that makes up today's entire second reading is essentially a doxology, a prayer blessing God. Paul fills this prayer of praise with theology. The first phrase, "To him who can strengthen you," is a reminder that everything comes from God, not just in the world of material creation, but even more in the interior state of those who choose to be in relationship with God. From God alone, do we receive the grace and strength we need.

Paul then speaks of his "gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" as a mystery that has been revealed. In this, he is referring directly to the unique revelation of God in and through Jesus. As Leon Morris points out in his commentary on this letter, there is nothing about the revelation of Jesus that could have been anticipated by human wisdom — not the incarnation, surely not the passion, and not the resurrection. The mystery of Christ is deemed a mystery precisely because it counters human expectations in every phase of Christ's life.

Paul wants his readers to understand that this mystery is the pinnacle of God's self-revelation to humanity. All the events of creation and the history of God and Israel have been building up to this moment. Pondering that offers all we might need to guide our prayer from this liturgy into the celebration of Christmas.

But Paul does not stop there. He moves on to explain the proper response to the revelation of this mystery: the obedience of faith. This phrase is as extraordinary as the one indicating that the Christ event was the culmination of salvation history. The

proclamation of the Gospel is intended to bring the whole world to the “obedience” of faith.

When we hear this, we need to take care to understand the word *obedience* in the way Paul used it. In Christian Scripture language, obedience is a type of attentive listening. To be obedient is to allow the word of another to come into you. Obedience is dialogic rather than imposing, it implies that one recognizes the value of allowing the other to lead. The behavior that flows from this sort of obedience to God reveals God’s presence in the person who has listened. The listening implied by obedience leads to a communion of mind and heart.

In closing his letter to the Romans, Paul summarizes his sense that the revelation of Christ is meant to be the culmination of world history. When Paul says, in effect, “To God, the one who offers all of this to us and the world, be the glory,” we hear an echo of the angels’ song, “Glory to God in the highest!” God is changing world history — and each and every one of us along the way. Glory be!

LUKE 1:26-38

Our consideration of the meaning of obedience can lead into our contemplation of the encounter between Mary and Gabriel. Even though the word *obedience* is never used, the entire story is about Mary’s obedience, her openness to allow the word of God to direct and change her life. When we read this story in the light of Paul’s blessing, we realize how profoundly it reflects the mystery of obedience.

We can also allow this story to spur us to ask about the signs of our times. Luke situates the story in the context of God’s time. It was the “sixth month.” The sixth month of what? Although we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist on June 24, that’s not because Zachariah had a calendar that he bequeathed to Luke. The sixth month of which Luke spoke was the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the sixth month since Gabriel had started talking to people in Israel about God’s upcoming plans. God’s timetable doesn’t match our schedules. Gabriel’s visits invite us to ponder what time it is now on God’s calendar.

When we listen to this story in the light of the first reading, we are struck by the fact that the same God who didn’t want David to build a temple passed by the Temple and the holy city when looking for a home. Deuteronomy 7:7 tells us that God chose Israel not for Israel’s greatness, but because God loved little Israel, because God had

called this insignificant people from the days of Abraham and accompanied them when they knew and wanted God's presence and even when they did not. God's choice of Mary is a reminder of things that Jesus said over and over about being humble and how unimpressed God is with what society thinks of as signs of importance.

There's a thought-provoking contrast in the images we have in the first reading and today's Gospel. David, the great king, wanted to build a temple for God and God said "No." Instead, God came to a humble woman to ask for a home, and she said "Yes." David thought he knew what greatness looked like. The kingdom Gabriel described to Mary was beyond the human imagination. In the end, the kingdom that God promised to David was the one inaugurated through Mary's "Yes."

Just as the Fourth Sunday of Advent leads directly into Christmas Eve, these readings are a preparation for the stories we will hear and see depicted for Christmas. The stable, not the temple, was Christ's first house on Earth. God didn't come to the family of a king or priest, but invited a simple girl, nobody to notice, to be the mother of Jesus.

God's timing is not ours, and although we often avoid sharing God's values, that has never stopped God from seeking us out. What it all comes down to is that God is looking for listening hearts. Can that be our gift this Christmas?

Planning: 4th Sunday of Advent

By: Lawrence Mick

This weekend will be something of a nightmare for planners and musicians. (If you start feeling sorry for yourself, think about the pastor or secretary who will be answering all those phone calls!) The fourth week of Advent starts and ends this weekend. The problems, of course, arise from trying to celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent on Saturday evening and Sunday morning and then starting the celebration of Christmas on Sunday afternoon or evening.

Parish leaders need to determine well in advance what is really workable. If you have a noon Sunday Mass, for example, how soon can you really manage the first vigil Mass of Christmas? Do you need to defer the start of Christmas a few hours or can you cancel the noon Mass on Sunday and convince people to come to earlier

Masses to complete Advent?

Many people today have gotten into the habit of celebrating Christmas Mass very early on Christmas Eve. That frees them for whatever family activities they want to do on the feast itself. For some, it amounts to “getting Mass out of the way,” but for many, it just allows a more relaxed celebration of the feast. While parish leaders naturally try to accommodate this desire for early Christmas Mass, you might question whether scheduling such Masses at 2:00 p.m. (or even 3:00 or 4:00) is really helping people to keep the religious nature of Christmas foremost in their awareness. Even if you normally have such early Masses for Christmas, the calendar this year might call for delaying a bit later so that there is some gap between the Advent Sunday and Christmas.

Another concern, of course, is when to decorate the worship space for Christmas. The temptation, of course, is to do all of that on Saturday, but that will conflict with the Advent liturgy. You could bring in major elements like Christmas trees (unlit) and the manger (without figures), signaling the nearness of the feast but still letting Advent’s preparatory nature be evident.

Whatever schedule is determined, make sure that all the various ministers involved are notified well in advance. It is often difficult to fill all the ministry slots in holiday periods, so start early. Remember to let lectors know which readings are being used at each of the Christmas Masses: Vigil, Night, Dawn and Day.

The Gospel for this Sunday comes from Luke, even though it’s Mark’s year, because Mark has no infancy narrative. It focuses our attention on Mary, so this might be another time to sing the Magnificat, especially if the assembly just learned a new version last week. That will help them really learn it while it also focuses on Mary in the same style as the Gospel.

Prayers: 4th Sunday of Advent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

This last week of Advcnt is brief, but the message is profound. The fulfillment of God’s promises is about to happen! This single day places us in a long line of yearning people. Christmas is upon us, yet the task of endless anticipation is a

sacred reality we need to embrace. Just as with those who are inches away from relief, rescue or reversal of any kind, still hang on. All of life is like this.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were promised to Mary by the angel Gabriel: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you entered this world as a surprise: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you come to us who are yearning for your presence: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now as members of the human race always waiting for good news.

Minister For all believers who continue to wait and hope for the final fulfillment of God's promises … in hope and anticipation, we pray

- For all the world's suffering people who have given up waiting for peace and justice … in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For those who believe they are too insignificant or unworthy for good news to transform their lives … in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For those who are too busy, too chaotic, too troubled to look for God's presence in and around them … in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For those still hurrying to prepare for this holiday season … in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For those in this community whose personal lives make it difficult to be prepared for the celebration of Christmas and Christ's coming among us … in hope and anticipation, we pray

Presider God of promise, today, as with every day, we are on the cusp of fulfillment. It is hard to contain our anticipation, and yet we wait. We long for your ongoing word to sustain us in this in-between time. Keep us expectant, so that, like Mary, we may receive Jesus with open hearts. We ask this in his name, Amen.

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