

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B), 24 December 2017  
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

We beseech thee, Almighty God, to purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son our Lord cometh he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

2 Samuel 7:4, 8-16  
Romans 16:25-27  
Luke 1:26-38

It strikes me as a little funny that we have to travel a distance of nine months in our imagination between now and this evening. The feast of the Annunciation is traditionally celebrated on March 25 and by that nine month calculation we get December 25 as the feast of the Incarnation. It has been the received wisdom for a long time that we celebrate Christmas on this December date because of its proximity to pagan festivals of winter solstice and Saturnalia. My friend and colleague, Andrew McGowan, following on the research of other liturgical scholars has a slightly different view.

Among early Christians, March 25 was reckoned to have been the date upon which the first Easter fell when translating the Jewish date of 14 or 15 Nissan into the Roman calendar. We get our calculation for Easter by trying to reckon the Sunday closest to that Jewish date of 14 or 15 Nissan. It was also a widely held belief in the ancient world that the greatest people died on the date of their conception, and therefore, using math, we get December 25. I have to admit that this is a swift representation of Professor McGowan's work, which I commend to your attention if

you are so inclined, but it gets us there in the end. These dates are not simply a matter of syncretism with ancient religion, although this is certainly an important component of the development of our traditions. Jesus conception and birth is and has always been associated with his death and resurrection. The whole of the Paschal mystery is, somehow, tied up in these dates and the distance between and among them.

Jesus Christ came and entered into our humanity so that we might be reconciled with God. Jesus came and entered into our humanity so that God might show us that the powers of death fail in the face of divine love, of divine self offering. In his message to Mary, after telling her not to be afraid and that she has “found favour with God,” the angel explains,

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. Jesus’ destiny is integral to his conception and birth. This child will be placed upon the throne of David, will be the anointed one, the messiah, and will inaugurate the kingdom of God.

We who know the whole story, we who have read the prophecies of Isaiah, know that the anointed one is also the one who will suffer many things, be handed over, killed, and on the third day, rise again. We who know the whole story can not forget that even from the moment of his conception, Jesus would be the one to preach and

teach and heal and in doing so run afoul of the powers of the world. These leaders saw in Jesus true authority and read his prophetic destiny as the messiah of the line of David to be a threat to their temporal power, a challenge to them personally. This messianic annunciation sealed Jesus to his destiny and put in motion a process that would free us from the bonds of death and make us subject only to the love and justice of God.

Today's celebration of the annunciation on this Fourth Sunday of Advent naturally leads us to this evening's celebration of the Nativity. The process begun nine months before at the annunciation becomes actualised in Jesus' birth in the manger in Bethlehem and reaches its fulfilment in his passion, death, and resurrection. Today we recall that God set this work in motion by calling a young girl and placing her in a most difficult position. The young girl he chose, Mary, heard what the angel had to say and must have known God and God's ways well enough to believe, to have faith in the words of the angel and accept her role as the one who would bring to birth the saviour of the nations. Our Mary is not a meek vessel, but a powerful person, full of love for God and for the world. A truly vulnerable figure, she showed unimaginable strength and courage to carry and bear our Lord, to raise him, and to witness his death and resurrection.

The story we hear today of that annunciation contains within itself the whole of the Paschal mystery. It reveals to us that God acts in and through unexpected people in unexpected times and places and values and favours the vulnerable and

marginalised. This story prepares us to celebrate once again tonight God's inbreaking into time and space and to remember that the child we honour this evening is the messiah, the Christ, who will suffer many things, be crucified, and rise again on the third day to sit upon the throne of the Kingdom of Love.

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