

The Fourth Sunday in Advent – 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Jesus said that no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Gabriel came to tell the Virgin Mary that she would be the new wineskin of salvation. The New Wine of Emmanuel would be in her womb. God with us – that's what Emmanuel means. It is what God intended to give to you from the moment He created the heavens and the earth, from the moment that He decided to make man in His own image. It was a phrase of intimacy in the Garden of Eden: God walked with them (Adam and Eve) in the cool of the day. Now the Son of God would be permanently with His people. Eve was bone of Adam's bone and flesh of his flesh. The Son of God would be bone of Mary's bone and flesh of Mary's flesh.

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, Hail, the Incarnate Deity! God loves you. Holy God, the Almighty, the Creator, the power of all that is and the Author of life – He identifies with you, He is in solidarity with you, He comes to you and makes His home in your life, in your world, in your circumstance. Not in a cedar house; He makes a virgin's womb His home. Content, the divine majesty makes His home where all of us have lain. Mary became the new wineskin of the Heavenly Father's grace. "Greetings O favored one, the Lord is with you." It was a pregnant moment. Mary heard the Gospel and she believed. In her ear was planted the richest message of heaven: "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 forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

There is a symmetry to be captured today, a symmetry that is to dwell in your mind. To a maiden pure and holy, an angel came – an evil angel whispering lies. "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." Satan brought a message of self, and pride, and rebellion and Eve reached out her hand. From Eve's womb would come all the fallen. A different angel, full of heaven's light, full of Gospel truth and Divine Love, Gabriel spoke of a Savior. Mary believed and conceived. May God's Word have its way with me. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). In precisely the way that man fell, God intervenes and brings life. That is the symmetry! God is determined to have the final Word. He is determined that life should conquer death. He is determined that holiness, His holiness, should defeat sin. His method, His strategy, is to bring His life into our own. Jesus is your brother. Jesus is God's Son and He is most certainly your brother. From Mary's womb comes a new man, new life. From Mary's womb comes a new race, full of divine favor, full of grace. The Lord Christ, He is the new and greater Adam. The infant son of Mary, in His blood is a new humanity.

Do you know what else has happened? Symmetrically, do you know what else has happened? The Word of the Gospel has come to your ear. The power of the Holy Spirit attends that Word. You have received the richness of God's favor through that Word and you know its veracity, its stunning truthfulness. Faith is conceived in you; the life of Christ has been conceived in you as you hear this Word. You know that Christ resides in you. Why? God has told you – through

His Word – and you know that it is the truth. Life; Christ embodies it. “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). Are you living in an age of death or an age of life? Are you a child of the resurrection or are you a walking cadaver, full of dread and fear and unfaith? Make no mistake, there are forces at work among us that want you to be full of dread. There are forces that hate the church, hate it, and will do all in their power to rob you of faith and fill your heart with anything except Christ. On the whole, the devil has had himself a hell of a year. How to detach people from Christ? Detach people from Christ’s church. It seems to me that nothing has actually been taken from anyone. Rather, people have relinquished their gifts willingly. What price? What, as yet unseen, price is going to be paid for this forfeit?

How about if we imagine a few precious lines of Scripture, imagine if they were left unsaid. Moses returns to the Israelite camp after receiving the Ten Commandments which God gave, the people are engaging in false worship, the golden calf is now the object of their adoration. Imagine Moses NOT saying: “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me” (Exodus 32:26). Imagine the sons of Levi **not** rallying to Moses side at that call. Imagine Joshua not saying this: “And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in this region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). Imagine that statement, that sentiment, that glorious and bracing call to action NOT being in the Scripture. Imagine Mary NOT saying to Gabriel: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Imagine those things not being said and then state the truth: how poor we would be. How diminished and poor and colorless we would be if not for words like these. We are presently flirting with diminishment, spiritual poverty and colorless faith if we do not say deliberately and boldly that the church must be the church.

This Scriptural story is our story, it is THE story, God’s story, God’s life is given through it and we are to be living it. The same radical allegiance, the same humble fidelity, the same Spirit-born trust – we are the people of God. Moses did say it and he meant it and he acted accordingly. Joshua did say it and he meant it and he acted accordingly. Mary did say it and she meant it and she acted accordingly. Those are *our* people. They aren’t untouchable heroes who transcend what we are capable of – no. They were common men and women who faced uncertainty, who dealt with their own doubts, who relied on God and the put His Word above other considerations; personal safety being one of those other considerations. Jesus is Lord. He was, as Gabriel said, great. His greatness was manifest when He laid aside His divine prerogatives and took up the form of a servant; for you. His greatness was manifest when He turned water into wine. Mary was there. She treasured it in her heart. At that wedding she knew what the angel had told her was true: “The Lord is with you.” You know it as well. He is here. With His Word and His Spirit, He is here; the Lord is with *you*. In this Divine Service the power of the Most High overshadows *you*. You know that you are not defined by your sins but by the blood of Christ. His sacrifice is the very light in this room. He changes wine into His blood, bread into His body. You eat it. You drink it. That’s what it means to have life to the full.

Nothing is impossible with God. He bears all human sin in His fully human body. He destroys death by dying. He rises from the dead and calls us out of our tombs of fear to participate in His

triumph. Nothing is impossible with God. He brought down the walls of Jericho with a seven-day parade and the blast of a ram's horn. He shut the mouths of lions and preserved His servant Daniel. He took Jonah to where He wanted Jonah to be by way of a great fish. Nothing is impossible with God. He gave His Son into death to save you, to see that you live forever, and He calls you to Himself, to receive what He graciously gives, to bless you with joy and hope and love. It is time for the church to awaken anew to the life that is hers. It is time for faithful saints to make their way back to worship. We live in an age of life. We live in Him; Life is found nowhere else. The beauty of His life is here, in His church, for all to receive and enjoy and be delivered from the colorlessness that is all around us. Let the angel's words stick in your ear: "Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God." How do you know? Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us.