

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year B, 18.xii.2004, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Holy Eucharist – LBW I  
II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:47-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

# Veni, Jesu Domine! \*

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and  
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**“Then Mary said [to the Archangel Gabriel],  
‘Here I am, the handmaiden of the LORD;  
let it be with me according to your word.’**



**Then the Angel departed from her . . . .**

[and later, in response to her cousin Elizabeth's acclamation, Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the LORD, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!']"



(Luke 1:38, 46, 47)

There are two things special about this Sunday to me. For one thing, you and I were separated by distance, though united by prayer on this Sunday a year ago. It is good to be with you a year later. For another thing, this Fourth Sunday in Advent is always extraordinarily full in Biblical content. The fullness of this Sunday, with its two readings from the Gospel according to Saint Luke, is like that of an expectant mother about to give birth. The blessing of this Sunday is the fullness of Mary's

expectation, a fullness of spirit as full when she first learns that her life has been chosen to give birth to the Living God in this world as it will be on the night of Our Lord's Nativity.

On this *holy* Sunday, the Season of our Advent expectation nearly reaches its fulfillment! What a *joyous* and *happy* responsibility it is to read, to study and to pray these two words of the Blessed Mother of Our Lord, her word of faith at *the Annunciation* through the Archangel Gabriel *and* her word of joy at her *Visitation* with her cousin, Elizabeth. I am never more glad to be called to the work of the sacred ministry and to bear the mark and responsibility of Ordination as now. As preacher for this service, I feel as though I have already opened the two most wonderful presents anyone could receive, the gift of the first Christmas all over again, *now*, wrapped in the faith of the Virgin. I wrote to our Seminarian, who has been certified as a Candidate for the Sacred Ministry, by the way, that I was having trouble deciding on whether to preach on the Magnificat or the

Annunciation. The only thing to do when presented with both of these gifts is, it seems to me, to preach on *both*. Tina, our hearts are full with joy for you as you now look forward to your first call and to Ordination, for the joy of declaring this wonderful and immortal story will be yours by the grace of the Holy Spirit for the rest of your life as a pastor of the Church!

Mary becomes more and more not only the Mother and Bearer of God in time and space, but also *our* Mother in faith, the more we enter into these two words on which depend the entire Gospel of our salvation, the Annunciation and the Magnificat. Let us enter into that joy with the whole Church now, without reservation. Let us enter into Mary's joy, even if we think we cannot feel joy, even if we do not feel very much like being joyful. May the Holy Spirit bless us so that we may be *surprised* by the joy God has in store for us, surprised just as Mary was.

The purpose of young Mary's life is disclosed to her at a time when most boys and girls are just beginning to think of what they 'might' be someday. That young person is rare who knows at age fourteen or fifteen what she or he *must* be. Mary of Nazareth, however, was one such child in the process of becoming a woman. But the idea of her destiny does not form in her before she hears of it from *outside* her realm of thought and experience. Those of us who have struggled into our young adult years with that question of vocation, that question of purpose, even sometimes questioning the usefulness of our lives as we look down what seems like an endless expanse of years, might *envy* Mary as the Archangel seems to lay everything out so plainly before her, like an employment contract she has only to sign. But Mary was not about to sign anything, since she might not have been able to even write her own name. And what is more, Gabriel's Annunciation of the message he had received from God's throne of glory does not seem that plain at

all to her young soul who is not about to say yes to just any heavenly visitor who happens by. After the Archangel's rhapsody of the great and wonderful things God has in store for Mary, her first words are, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

Now, let us think about this way that Luke has of telling the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel according to Saint John, the Gospel begins in eternity before time and space began. In the Gospel according to Saint Mark, the Good News just begins with Jesus fully grown at the Jordan River to receive John's baptism. According to Saint Luke, the physician, the coworker of Saint Paul, and according to ancient Christian tradition the personal physician of the Blessed Virgin Mary in her place of refuge at Ephesus, the Good News of Jesus Christ *begins with a conversation*, a conversation in which *faith* keeps the conversation going, as it does down to this very day.

We might be tempted to call this exchange between the Archangel Gabriel and the Blessed Virgin Mary a *holy*

conversation, a very pious exchange, holy and pious in the sense of a frieze or b $\hat{a}$ s-reliefe without much movement. That is how the Annunciation is sometimes pictured in Christian art [as in the ANNUNCIATION by Eugène-Emmanuel Amaury-Duval]:



That notion of a motionless Annunciation in which the Archangel delivers the lily symbolizing virginity somewhat like a Mother's Day bouquet, admired but *expected* from the recipient, and some sort of automatic Magnificat is true to the New Testament only in that the Mary of Luke's Gospel brings

this holy conversation to a *full and complete stop* until one very important detail can be cleared up. *‘How can this be?!’* How does Mary get from that very sensible question to ‘Let it be with me according to your word’? [The painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti captures the drama of Luke’s Annunciation in a more graphic way, more faithful to Luke, in his ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI]:



Here, the Virgin recoils from the Annunciation and looks at the lily the Archangel offers with genuine dread.]

Mary of Nazareth has no direct evidence of the veracity of the Archangel's word, though everything Gabriel says about God's promises to the House of Jacob must have sounded familiar to her from what she had heard at Synagogue and on her family's yearly trips to Jerusalem and visits to the Temple. But, finally, she answers not because she is convinced and cannot think otherwise but rather *because she believes*. Some people believe what they want to believe, as the saying goes, but Mary does not want to believe this news that could mean her own death. And yet, she asks her question, not only out of the instinct for survival and self-preservation, but because she is already fascinated by the tremendous mystery of God's purpose in history and in her life, because she is already falling forever in love with that purpose.

At the Visitation, Mary finds herself part of a community of at least two, for Elizabeth has had to contend with her own doubts along the way to her pregnancy with her longed for

child, John the Baptizer. Mary finds that Elizabeth is not surprised at Mary's news. Instead, she is affirmed and supported in her expectation of the Christ Child's birth. At that moment, Elizabeth and Mary together constitute the whole Church in their community of faith and joy at what God is doing in both their lives for the sake of the whole world.

Though Mary and Elizabeth both started out in faith and now sing of their hope with joy, Mary with her *Magnificat* and Elizabeth with the first-ever *Ave, Maria!*, the 'Hail, Mary' prayer, they never leave *faith* behind. It is easy enough to think of that when we must grope our way by faith through impossibly difficult times, but, when we are in the midst of life, healthy and vital, the belief we may take for granted then is always, *always* grounded in *faith*, trust in God's promise and purpose because God is God, trust in God's love for us and all humanity and the world grounded in the love the Father reveals to us in giving His only Son for us.

Mary never gets beyond the radical faith of her ‘Let it be with me according to your word,’ *and neither do we*. Faith, in order to be faith, must be open-ended, allowing the Holy Spirit room to complete God’s purpose for us and in us. We share the way of Christ with one who in her faith and in her joy is both our sister and mother, thanks be to God! ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. With her we pray in the words of the Office of Vespers:

**Lord God, You have called Your servants  
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.  
Give us faith to go out with good courage,  
not knowing where we go,  
but only that Your hand is leading us  
and Your love supporting us;  
through Jesus Christ Our Lord we pray.**

✠ Amen.

