



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

21. December, 2008. Advent IV

Title: **"Blessed Are You Among Women"**

Text: St. Luke 1: 26-38 (39-55)

J.J.

KID'S KORNER OUTLINE: "Sign of the Cross and Other Gestures"

- Have you ever noticed, that sometimes it looks like Rev. Kathy or I are swatting at flies?
- Or, perhaps you have noticed the person sitting next to you doing the same thing.
- Well . . . we're not swatting flies
- But we are making a special "sign" to remember God: It is called the sign of the cross.
- Church people, especially Episcopalians, do an awful lot of that.
 1. How does one do it?
 2. What does it mean?
 3. When does one do it?
- (1) Trace your fingers from top to bottom, and then left to right (this direction I never learned properly—I do it the Orthodox way). (PRACTICE IT!)
- (2) "Jesus Christ came down from heaven . . . and has entered into my heart" It also reminds me of my baptism (where the sign was first used on me).
- (3) There are a number of places in our order of service where it is used
 - a. At the beginning of the service ("Blessed be God...")
 - b. At the end of the "Gloria"
 - c. At the reading of the Gospel (3x—head, lips, heart)
 - d. At the "Salutation" before the Sermon
 - e. At the conclusion of the Nicene Creed ("Resurrection of the dead")
 - f. At the Absolution
 - g. During the Sanctus ("blessed is the One who comes in the name...")
 - h. During the Eucharistic Prayer ("Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament,")
 - i. In receiving the body and blood of Christ during the distribution
 - j. At the final blessing.
- These are only suggestions—NOT RULES!!
- Make the sign of the cross if it helps you remember God; don't if it doesn't! OK?

S.D.G.



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Ah, at last, we've come to the Last Sunday in Advent, Advent 4, and we make the transition from the world's celebration of this holiday season (and as I wrote in "The Window," I'm not one to condemn the world's celebration of Christmas; I'm always up for a good party) . . . we put away the worldly celebration, and prepare ourselves for a deeper, more spiritual observance of the twelve holy days of Christmas.

The Gospel Reading for today is about the Angel's Announcement to the Virgin Mary. Unfortunately, the "periscope-pickers" cut the story short and we miss out on Mary's "Visit" to Elizabeth and Mary's wonderful Song of Praise—the Magnificat. When you read the story in its entirety, the way Luke intended it to be read (and I invite you to do that), well, there is no better way to prepare for these holy days that are upon us.

To understand what is really going on here, we've got to step back from it a little and look at the whole picture. As Marnie Hartman, during our "Advent Event," introduced us to the "The First Christmas," we were invited to adjust our reading lenses somewhat . . . to adjust the way we think, not only about this story, but about all of the Christmas stories, because we tend to look at them through rose-colored glasses, making everything cheery and wonderful. I grew up thinking Jesus was born in a cute German Schwarzwald-style manger, and nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, everything was not so calm or all so bright, as we like to sing about it, and that's true not only about today's Gospel story, the "Annunciation," but also about the "Visitation," and Joseph & Mary's trip to Bethlehem, and the manger, the shepherds and the sheep, the wisemen and their gifts – it ain't all what it appears to be. Truth be told, those nights were not so silent . . . and for those who were involved in it, those nights were anything but holy.

A young woman is told by an angel that she is going to have a baby . . . and this woman is not yet married—engaged, but not married—and in those days, that was a big "no-no." Step into Mary's shoes for a moment: The angel of the Lord comes to you, in person, and tells you you're going to be a mother. And Mary, probably like many of us, responds: "How can this be?" And the angel tells you: "Don't worry, God will take care of the details" and then disappears (just like an angel: they come, they say their piece and disappear . . . and they're going to do that again and again: to St. Joseph, to the Shepherds, to the Wisemen, and later on at the empty tomb) And you simply stand there, in awe, wondering what in all the world just hit you . . . like, "mom, you never told me about this" . . . or, how in all the world are you going to explain this to your boyfriend, Joseph, or to the family and friends or busy-body neighbors. Good Lord!

Now, the first few months were probably OK—like "normal." And you think: maybe it was just a dream. But then it happens—you know: the tired feeling, the lack of energy, the craving of strange foods, the morning sickness. What must have gone through Mary's head? Her whole life is in front of her. What is she to do? What is she to say? How does she respond when mom calls: Mary, it's time to get out of bed . . . we've got work to do . . . And Mary just isn't up to it. Or Joseph notices that you're putting on a little weight: Mary can't just say "Well, I think I'm pregnant." That would never do, not in those days. That could get you stoned . . . stoned to death. Oh my, Mary, oh my!

Now it's important for me . . . and I hope it's important for you . . . it is important for us to hear this story once again as we prepare ourselves to make the Christmas journey. It's important for me to take off the rose colored glasses that I like to wear, and to get down to the realities of life as we live it. Life, as Mary discovered it (and will continue to discover it, because her story is just beginning, as it runs its course to the foot of a cross and an empty tomb), Life is rarely, if ever, predictable. Life, as we live it, constantly throws out its curve balls. We live with a lot of uncertainty: a sudden hospitalization . . . unexpected bills . . . the discovery of a malignancy . . . the economy turned sour . . . the sudden termination of a job . . . the break-up of a life long relationship . . . the death of a loved one. We live all the time with the unexpected. And, frankly, how does one cope with that?

Well, Mary . . . Mary points the way for us. Listen as she responds to this Messenger from God: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And that's a clue for us as once again we prepare to make the Christmas journey . . . and . . . as we continue on our own life Journey . . . through our Epiphanies . . . our Lenten Seasons . . . our Good Friday's . . . and our Easter resurrections . . . throughout all of life . . . Mary has it right: "Here am I . . . let it be with me according to your Word." And that Word, as we are told, became flesh and dwelt among us . . . and dwells among us, now! . . . full of grace and truth! A Blessed Fourth Advent. Amen.

S.D.G.

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