



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

December 18, 2011, Fourth Sunday of Advent

By John M. Buchanan

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16
Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26
Romans 16:25–27
Luke 1:47–55
Luke 1:26–38

Introduction

The Fourth Sunday of Advent is one of the most important, and most challenging, preaching Sundays of the year. For months, many in North America have been waiting for this week. Retail merchants are holding their corporate breath to see whether holiday shopping will result in year-end profitability, and the economists watch to see how the market will react. People in the pews are preoccupied with finishing last-minute shopping, making travel arrangements, and attending parties. Congregations and preachers, caught up in this frenzy, are understandably exhausted. And just at this moment, the preacher's assignment is to announce the coming of good news that will be for all people, in all situations, including those sitting in a pew, worn to a frazzle, preparing for Christmas.

Luke 1:26–38

She is perhaps the most recognizable woman in human history. She stands sentinel on thousands of dashboards and is the subject of some of the most sublime Western art. The Italian Renaissance was obsessed with her. Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation* portrays the moment when the angel appears to a young Jewish girl and says, "Hail, Mary. The Lord is with you." Mary, startled, afraid, says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). The original is a fresco painted on the wall of the monastery of San Marco in Florence, at the head of a stairway. The colors are delicate pastels. The angel and Mary sit across from each other and are leaning slightly, the angel toward Mary and Mary drawing back gently. It is a mysterious moment when heaven and earth momentarily meet and God chooses an ordinary young woman as instrument of God's mercy and love and grace, a moment for which words and concepts and intellectual propositions are hopelessly inadequate, and which art and music come much closer to expressing.

Mary speaks to people, regardless of their religious faith or lack of it. She resonates deeply in the human soul. She is, after all, central to the whole story. She was there at the birth of Jesus and his death and many days in between. We first meet her in the nativity story: already betrothed to Joseph, not yet married—and pregnant. The late Morton Kelsey imagines the gossip:

Most people are more comfortable with violence than unconventional sexual behavior and Mary's neighbors were no exception. The villagers could count and they talked about the impropriety of Mary's pregnancy. They smiled knowingly as Mary passed them to draw water from the village well. When the story of a heavenly visitor leaked out they snickered openly.ⁱ



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Author Reynolds Price imagines Mary as the object of lifelong scorn because of her problem pregnancy. “Bastard, Bastard, Mary’s Bastard boy! God’s big baby!” he imagines her neighbors taunting her and her son.ⁱⁱ It’s a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, ninety miles. It took a week traveling on foot and by donkey along winding roads. When they finally arrived, she had her baby son, in a stable behind an inn, and she and Joseph wrapped him in the bands of cloth they brought with them and laid him in the manger.

Mary is a reminder of how grounded in life this faith of ours is. We often think about our faith in terms of ideas and propositions and truth claims. We often measure faith in terms of doctrinal statements and creeds and whether or not we can subscribe to them. Mary reminds us that our faith is a response to a love that was expressed not in a carefully reasoned treatise but in a human life, in the everyday drama and passion of betrothal and marriage and pregnancy and birth and death. Mary reminds us that God cares deeply about the human condition. God chose a modest, nondescript young woman. God chooses to be with the modest and marginal, the poor and weak, the humble and forgotten. Mary reminds us that God can use modest men and women who do not seem to have much to commend them, not much that the world recognizes as important and powerful. Sometimes young human beings do the most important work.

Mary reminds us that we should expect God to show up, not only in inspired worship, beautiful art, and elegant theology, but where the poor people are forgotten, vulnerable people oppressed, weak people overlooked. Mary is part of a movement that is more than a political agenda advocating for human rights, equal justice, and the excruciatingly difficult work of peacemaking. Mary is a reminder of the most distinctive characteristic of biblical faith, namely, the profound compassion of God. Many Christians picture God as all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, “in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our God can be a little intimidating actually, but for centuries Mary has reminded the faithful that God is also infinite compassion and infinite love.

For centuries Mary has reminded people whose needs were urgent and who needed something more than a well-reasoned theology—suffering people, oppressed people, sick people, dying people—of an accessible side of God, a feminine side, a maternal side, a God who comes to us in the midst of suffering and oppression. So let Mary—who, at the end, held the lifeless body of her son in her arms—be a reminder to the mother whose son was killed in Afghanistan, or on the streets of Chicago, of the mercy and compassion and nearness of God. Let Mary be a reminder that—whatever fear or loss or anxiety or uncertainty, whatever joy or anticipation or eager love lies ahead—love came down at Christmas, to be with us and to keep us, and all creation, always and forever.

ⁱ See Morton T. Kelsey, *The Drama of Christmas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 20.

ⁱⁱ See Reynolds Price, “Jesus of Nazareth Then and Now,” *Time*, vol. 154, no. 23 (December 6, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Chalmers Smith, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” in *The Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995), 66.