

Fourth Sunday in Advent

HANDMADE

Luke 1:26-38

The Fourth Sunday of Advent Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He 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 ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37For nothing will be impossible with God." 38Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

DIAGNOSIS: Self-Made

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Sore Afraid*

Nothing makes us 21st-century folks more nervous than having our individuality threatened. We want to be self-made; not defined by what others would impose on us. We choose our fashion style, our diet, our schooling, our pastimes, our occupation, our mate, our gods. Each of these choices either shapes us into the person we choose to be, or we abandon them in order to redefine ourselves. We conceive and birth ourselves, or so we think, with no divine intervention necessary.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unafraid, Or Is That Oblivious?*

The problem with self-conception is that it is self-delusion. No one is self made; we are shaped by every relationship and circumstance that comes our way-for good or for evil. And while it may be true that we are able to choose our breakfast cereal, it is a myth that we choose our god. No wonder we fail to entertain angels, as Mary did (v. 26); we expect them to show up only when we desire their presence. And, bidden or not, God comes-when we least expect. Which means, for those of us occupied with “making ourselves,” that we are likely to miss God’s presence altogether. Especially if it shows up in the womb of a teenage girl and, later, a manger.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“Afraid Not”*

There is no better way to alienate ourselves from God than to ignore him or bend him to our will. There is no clearer way to declare our disdain for God, than by living oblivious to his desire to make something new of us. And to our barren faith, God has only one response: “Afraid not.”

PROGNOSIS: Hand-Made

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Fearfully Good*

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It's hard to imagine that God would be willing to do much with oblivious interlopers like us. And, that God conceives his reclamation of us in a teen mother's womb is equally incredible. But Mary is precisely the instrument that God employs to play his gospel tune. No sooner has Mary cowered in the presence of God's angel Gabriel than she throws her hands open and confesses the truth: "You're in charge, God. Do with me what you will" (v. 37). And that is precisely what God does-first through the manger, then the cross-God begets our salvation. God shows up in the flesh of his Son to personify his mercy and grace. He overshadows (v. 35) our oblivious, faithless hearts and births us through his own death; and does so, as the hymn says, to "fit us for heaven to live with Thee there."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Unafraid, But Not Oblivious*

Mary is often referred to as God's handmaid, ready to serve whatever purpose God commands. And, though we are still enticed by the idea of being self made, we know that God does much better work than we do. And so we surrender ourselves into the hands of the potter (Isaiah 64). We may not be Mother Mary, but even we know we are handmade by God. And, as we cling to his promise of mercy and salvation, he makes us what we cannot make ourselves: cruciform Christ followers.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Afraid No More*

Such knowledge changes our priorities: Being self made is no longer at the top of our list of pursuits. Instead, we take up a new language of prayer: "Let it be according to your will, Lord. You know best." And we turn from being self-engaged, to engaging the world that God loves, with the mercy the world needs. For nothing is impossible with God (v. 37).