

Fourth Sunday of Advent

GOD ONE-UPS HIMSELF

Luke 1:26-38

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

In 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. 31 And 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 the Son of God. 36And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this was 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.

Note: It is interesting that the angel Gabriel had made an initial appearance in the book of Daniel and this is now his

second and third appearances. Just as when he appeared to Daniel during liturgical prayer, he appears to Zechariah during prayer, and just like Daniel, Zechariah becomes speechless. In his first appearance, he prophesied the coming of an “anointed one” (messiah) who would establish a righteous kingdom (Daniel 9:20-27). Now, his appearances seem to indicate that that time has arrived. One commentary (The New Jerome Biblical Commentary) even suggests that the 490 days in Daniel are “fulfilled” by adding Elizabeth’s remaining 180 pregnancy days, Mary’s 270 days of pregnancy, and the 40 days before Jesus enters the Temple.

DIAGNOSIS: The Rules of Reality are Absolute

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“That’s Impossible!”*

When Mary is told by Gabriel that she will give birth to the Son of God, she immediately asks the logical biological question, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” (v. 34). We enlightened moderns would probably be much more forthright and would simply DECLARE that some things are just not possible. WE know there are scientific, absolute principles that rule the universe (we call them the laws of physics), we know there are biological laws as well, such as that it’s biologically impossible for young virgins and post-menopausal women to have babies, that dead, decomposed bodies do not re-compose back to life, and so on.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“I don’t believe it!”*

But Mary’s consternation involves more. She’s perplexed because Gabriel had called her “favored one” (v. 28) in his greetings. How exactly is she “favored”? Surely not by getting pregnant out of wedlock! Plus, Gabriel had said, “The Lord is with you” (v.

28). Yikes! Is this a friendly house-call, or is God coming to settle accounts with her? Those divine principles (also called the Law) don't just govern physical reality (such as planets and bodies), they also govern interactive reality as well. To wit, the law of reciprocity is just as ironclad as the law of gravity, and, maybe because it is so absolute, we humans can't help but trust it and measure ourselves and each other by it. Thus, Mary ponders why she would be favored – had she done anything to deserve it, had she measured up? Why would God pay attention to HER? We echo that same unbelief when we despair and/or become self-righteous. Whichever way we go, we're dancing to the Law's tune, as of course we must.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dead Meat*

The great benefit in having absolute, unalterable divine principles is that they “make the world go round” and keep it going. The great trouble though is that under them, everything is programmed to end. Their end result is akin to going through a giant meat-grinder. First the process grinds its victims up via critique and criticism, then it spits them out ground up and biodegraded. Alas, dead.

Prognosis: God One-Ups Reality

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“It's so Wonderful, it MUST be true!”*

With a breathtaking flash of what can only be described as stunning mercy, God (the programmer) maneuvers to one-up His own divine principles: God will “save” creation from the meat-grinder system – not by junking the system, but by succumbing to it – and then overcoming it! His awe-inspiring strategy is that He will join humanity and go through the grinder-system himself. Hereupon Gabriel's announcement rings out: Tat-ta-da! The “anointed one” (messiah) is arriving! God's spirit will hover over Mary, and she will conceive a child (vv. 30-33). Note how

this is the crowning achievement, the piece de resistance to the creation story (or is creation itself being one-upped here?): the impossible WILL happen. Not only will a virgin have a baby, but thereby God will join himself to humanity and become human! Note Gabriel's emphasis on the baby's name, Jesus, which means, God saves (v. 31). Already that explains that through THIS baby, God will fulfill the promise he made to Daniel (and Israel, and us). Fast forward to Easter morning where he makes good on that promise and one-ups his own divine principles by bringing Jesus' biodegraded body back to life again.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"I do believe it"*

Upon hearing Gabriel's reply, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (v. 37), Mary humbly acquiesces. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord," she says, "Let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38). She will trust God's promise, incredible though it seems. One wonders whether it took her Son's lifetime to realize just how incredibly favored she really was in the end! True, she got to be the Theotokos-the bearer of God (and that's a pretty huge "favor" and sometimes, that's all we think about). But even more favored than that is God's promise that this fait accompli is FOR HER and all other meat-grinder victims who hang on to Jesus (faith). The impossible will happen, reality will be one-upped: at His command, her/our decomposed bodies will re-compose and live again!

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) : *"I've gotta share it!"*

Immediately after Gabriel leaves her, Mary, the theotokos, rushes to share her news with her cousin Elizabeth and breaks out singing the joyful Magnificat (vv. 39-56). Mary is often called the first disciple because she carried God's Word (literally!) out to the world. In the same way today, all us meat-grinder-victims who hang on to Jesus become little

theotokos-es ourselves-modern disciples, singing joyfully (i.e., delivering) the good words of God's great favor/mercy to our families and neighbors. That joyful song prompts a new dance, the dance of life called mercy-and-forgiveness and/or the kingdom of heaven.