

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Roger Wm. Smith on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A sermon about belief

“The angel said to (Mary), ‘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.’” –Luke 1:35

Every now and then we find ourselves in a conversation when the question is asked “Do you believe in the virgin birth?”

When I am asked that, without hesitation, I answer, “Yes, I believe in the story of the virgin birth.” It is a story rich in the basic truths of the Christian faith.

The author of the story wants the reader to understand—to believe—that Mary’s child will be called the Son of God. And so we say, Sunday after Sunday that “we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...” That is a basic declaration of belief.

Was his mother actually a virgin when Jesus was conceived? As the King James translation of the story puts it, when the angel told Mary she was going to have a baby, she asked “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” Today, we might ask, “How indeed?” In this enlightened age when all truth must be verified by the evidence, since we have no examples of a child being conceived in such a way, we have doubts about this part of the story.

(The word for virgin, by the way, is parthenos. That was the term used by the Greeks to designate a virgin or a young woman... the same word was used in both designations. Whether that means the Greeks thought all virgins were young women or all young women were virgins, I’ll leave it to you to decide!)

Luke had political reasons for telling us that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin. The Roman emperor at the time was Caesar Augustus—the greatest of all the emperors. The legend about his birth was that he was conceived by the god Apollo in the womb of Atia, the emperor’s human mother, and was, therefore, called “The Son of God”. He was given a number of familiar sounding titles, such as “Prince of peace” and “Savior of his people”. Luke, in defiance of these imperial claims, wants his reader to understand that Jesus is the true Son of God, whose greatness far surpasses that of Caesar Augustus.

Augustus achieved his kingdom through military might and violence. Jesus achieved his kingdom quietly by humility and non-violence. The truth here is that there is more power in the way of Jesus, the Son of God, than the way of Augustus Caesar, also called the Son of God. And basic to our belief is that “his kingdom will have no end.”

As one person has written about Jesus: “Twenty centuries have come and gone and he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the

mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built, and all of the parliaments that ever sat... have not affected the life of humanity upon earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life."

I like the more familiar King James version of the angel's greeting to Mary: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women," (vs. 28).

Perhaps no other event recorded in Scripture has been more often rendered in art. Paintings and sculptures of it abound. There have been composed countless songs, such as the one we sang earlier (Hymn 265), about it. It is the source of the Ave Maria, a prayer perhaps more frequently offered than even the Lord's Prayer. And it is not just the private property of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Anglicans and others say it. Join me, if you know it.

Hail Mary, full of grace
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.

How many composers have set that prayer to music, and how frequently has it been played and sung at weddings, funerals, and Christmas services?

So why is this? Is there something in this story that takes hold of the human imagination, gladdens our hearts, and gives us hope? I am sure there is.

When that angel showed up, the author tells us that Mary was much perplexed. That is not surprising. Here is a young woman—perhaps still in her teens, suddenly being greeted by big, booming apparition, telling her that she is blessed among women. When the angel gave her the message that she was to become the mother of the Messiah, she must have been not only perplexed, but frightened nearly to death.

What was she going to tell Joseph? What were the neighbors going to think? Wouldn't the authorities accuse her of committing adultery, the punishment for which would be stoning.

What preparation did she have to be the mother of one described as great, the Son of the Most High, being given the throne of his ancestor King David, destined to reign over the House of Jacob forever, and of whose Kingdom there will be no end?

Can't we just hear her saying, "Who, me? You've got to be kidding!" No, I don't suppose a young woman in those days would have responded to an angel in such a way. But if she were living today, she might have. It was, after all, an overwhelming and frightening assignment she was given.

Let me share with you what Frederick Buechner has written about the angel's visit to Mary:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung on the answer of this girl." —*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 39

Mary's answer is one of the great lines in all of history: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." One of the definitions that my dictionary gives to the term "virgin" is "happening for the first time." Mary's response was a happening for the first time, so unique, so virginal that, despite the manner in which her son was conceived, we are quite within the mark if we continue to call her the Blessed Virgin Mary

Do we believe in this story? Do I? Do you?

Do we believe that this young woman's submission to God's will could be a model for us all? Does not what happened to her on that fateful day provide us with the perfect icon of the Christian faith?

Let us pray

Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.