

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

The Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday December 20

Revelation 12:1-10

I have often joked that this passage would make for a great Christmas card. While it might be a funny thought, this vision is actually a lens through which we need to view the birth of Jesus. So what is this vision all about?

The woman in the vision is God's people. The dragon is Satan. The child is Jesus. Jesus comes from amongst the people of God and Satan is seeking to destroy Him. It is a sobering thought to realize that in the birth of Jesus, we are dealing with a cosmic and spiritual conflict between God and Satan. This child was born to destroy Satan and all that he stands for: sin and death. Satan's desire is to devour Jesus, to destroy Him. As we draw within days of celebrating the birth of our Savior, we would do well to remember that at stake in this tender birth is the very salvation of all creation.

The child, we are told, was not devoured, but caught up to God. Indeed, Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to the Father where He now rules with a rod of iron over the whole of the universe. And the woman, God's people, is kept safe, we are told, for one thousand, two hundred and sixty days, that period of time which symbolizes the time from Jesus' resurrection to His return in glory.

This is where we live: adorned with splendor and under the protection of the Almighty God as we await the return of our Savior! As we prepare to celebrate His birth, remember that His birth signals the beginning of Satan's end. Rejoice in that victory even as you wait, under God's protection, for Jesus to return and finish His defeat of the dragon.

Monday December 21

Luke 1:1-25

Today, we meet Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband Zechariah. They were both righteous, but childless and advanced in years. As the passage unfolds, Zechariah, while serving in the Temple, is visited by the angel Gabriel who tells him that Elizabeth will bear a child: John the Baptist. "But Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this?" He didn't believe.

Many people wonder how this differs from Mary's response when she received the news that she will conceive Jesus. The answer is simple. Mary wondered *how* it would happen. Zechariah wanted proof that it *would* happen. While there is much to learn from this lengthy passage, two things surface today.

First, God's word is to be trusted. Zechariah had incredible nerve! All through Scripture, when people encounter angels, there is fear. This encounter, like others, begins with the admonition, "Do not be afraid." And yet Zechariah is not only able to overcome his fear, but ask for proof from this angel that what he just said would actually come to pass. Gabriel, to say the least, is not amused. Zechariah should have known better. God's word is to be trusted. If God says He will do something, He will do it! We need to trust God's word.

Second, and just as important, righteous people make mistakes. It is comforting to know that Zechariah is "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the lord blameless." And yet he makes a pretty big mistake: not believing the archangel Gabriel. To be righteous is not so much about being free from mistakes as it is about our relationship with God. To be righteous is to be in a right relationship with God. Zechariah was a righteous man who sinned. But he shows his righteousness in what he did next. He received the rebuke, bore the punishment, and when the child was born, was obedient to name him John.

When we make mistakes, we, too, must be open to the rebuke and punishment of the Lord and be willing to then change our ways. Righteous people, when they sin, repent and return to the Lord.

Tuesday December 22

Luke 1:26-38

In today's passage, we meet Mary and Joseph and hear of the angel's news to Mary: she will bear the Messiah. A moment's reflection should astonish us. Can you imagine being a young woman, perhaps as young as thirteen, and being told that while you are still engaged you will bear a child who will be the Savior of God's people? Can you imagine the thoughts and emotions that would be running through you?

On the one hand, she must have felt great honor in knowing that she would be bringing the long awaited Messiah into the world. Even though we are not being asked to do exactly what Mary did, we are nevertheless still being asked to *be* Jesus in the world as we are indwelt by His Holy Spirit. The work we are called to do should leave us trembling with the same sense of honor and trepidation that Mary surely felt.

On the other hand, we cannot discount the cost of this work. Mary will suffer shame as those who do not believe that this is God's work will shun her for her perceived sin. This righteous woman, whose delight is in being who God would have her be, will be

considered a sinner for being obedient to the Lord. For the rest of her life, she will bear this scar. She is handing over her future to the Lord in absolute obedience. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Are we willing to truly and obediently engage the holy calling which we, too, have received to bear Jesus into the world even if it costs us the things we hold most dear? That's what Mary did. May we have the grace to do likewise.

Wednesday December 23

Luke 1:39-56

Mary went with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, she called Mary "blessed" and the baby in her womb, John the Baptist, leaped for joy. Even in the womb, John the Baptist found delight in acknowledging Jesus!

What an incredible thing it is that even in the womb, John was already doing that for which he was created! That's worth considering for a moment. Before John was even born, God had a purpose for his life. His whole life would be but one great leaping for joy at the presence of Jesus.

Before any of us were even born, God had a purpose for our lives. In that sense, our whole lives are simply a process of getting to know who God made us to be. Each one of us is unique, special, and created for a purpose. How exciting life is when we engage it as a process of getting to know what God has made us to be!

As the passage continues, Mary breaks into the song we now know as the Magnificat. One of the things that truly jumps out at us from Mary's song is how rich it is in Scripture! For the student of the Bible, the mind flashes back to the great prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Mary knows Scripture and the great promises of God, and that sheds a lot of light on Mary's faith. Why was Mary able to hand her future over to God? Why was Mary willing to suffer humiliation and shame? Why was Mary so filled with praise? Because she knew God's word and promise.

The more we know God's word, the more we will be able to hand our lives over in absolute and loving obedience. The more we know God's word, the more we will fill our lives with praise. The more we know God's word, the more Christmas will mean to us.

Thursday December 24

Luke 1:57-66

Christmas is truly upon us now, and so today we read of the birth of John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for the Savior. The Baptist is here; get ready for Jesus! Sometimes, little things in Scripture strike us. Today, it is the simple phrase, "Now the time came..."

It seems that in Scripture, there is often a sense of dramatic promise and growing anticipation followed by simple fulfillment. Zechariah being visited by Gabriel, being struck dumb, his aged wife being with child, the baby leaping in Elizabeth's womb. All the growing anticipation. And then the time comes. It is almost as though the Bible is saying, "Well of course it happened. No surprises here. What else did you expect?" Indeed, in dealing with God, we should all know well and trust these moments of, "Now the time came..."

God keeps His word. He has promised to do great things in your life: set you free from sin, forgive you, empower you for ministry, make you like Jesus, and raise you to glory, to name a few of those great promises. What God has promised, He will do. There are no surprises there. There will come a day in your life where the time has come. God will accomplish His will in and through you. Expect nothing less.

Christmas is upon us now. The time has come. It is our prayer that this Advent season has drawn you closer to our Savior and that you feel ready to celebrate Christmas and ready for Jesus' return in glory. But even if you don't quite feel ready, don't despair. The time has come, but it's not too late. It is God's promise that if we want to draw close to Him, He will draw close to us. As you begin your Christmas celebration, draw near to God and you can expect nothing less than Him drawing near to you!