

Learning to Receive

Sunday, December 20, 2020 - Advent 4

Sermon Preached by Mr. Casey Bushman, Licensed Lay Preacher

Today's gospel lesson contains one of the great "If I could be a fly on that wall" scenarios in world history. Who wouldn't give anything to be there, "in the room where it happened," when the angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah? One would likely witness every shade of the emotional spectrum in Mary's expression: shock, amazement, disbelief, fear, joy, curiosity, wonder. And yet, I think, in this imagined scenario of eavesdropping, a key subtext of this event would go right over our heads — because we are not 1st century Palestinian Jews awaiting a coming king.

You see, bound up with the angel's announcement to Mary that she would give birth to Christ is this important echo of an old story from the Hebrew scriptures, selected for us today on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent.

God's people had come into the Promised Land, and the newly-established King, David, had a fine palace built for himself in Jerusalem. But God's presence still resided in tabernacle, a moveable tent made of poles and curtains. King David was bothered by the seeming contradiction. "Why should God stay in a tent when I live in a house of cedar," he wonders aloud to the prophet Nathan. In David's mind, it was like inviting a beloved family member to come visit and then having them pitch a tent in the backyard when there's a furnished guest room available.

(Let's set aside for now that in COVID times this is actually a great idea and not rude at all! Please, if your family is coming to visit this week, PLEASE, PLEASE set up a tent for them in the backyard and don't invite them in unless they have quarantined for 10 days and tested negative — you're not being impolite, I promise! Okay?. :) But for the sake of understanding our story, just imagine the level of AWKWARDNESS David must have been feeling. I mean, denying your cousin or brother-in-law a warm bed is a little uncomfortable, but the creator of the universe is just slightly more deserving of a nice place to stay.

Well, David sets his mind toward this objective: to build a permanent Temple in Jerusalem for the God of Israel. Sounds like a fine thing to do, yes? But this is where the story turns: God **rejects** David's plans. God mildly (or maybe not so mildly) rebukes the thought that he needed someone to build him a permanent residence. But there isn't only rebuke offered; a promise is made: God would deliver an unending supply of kings to carry on David's line. His throne would be established forever; his rule would be permanent. Do you see what happened here? David said to God, "I'm going to build you a house," a temple, and God replied back to David, "No, I'm going to build YOU a house" — meaning, a royal dynasty — the "house" of David. It's a clever word play, and a beautiful promise. Tables turned! A covenant that God's people would cling to for *centuries* was sealed.

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Hospitality is a recurring element of so many stories in scripture: stories of shared meals, of strangers passing through the land, of people in need of shelter. The guest-host dynamic often operates almost invisibly in the background, it's so ingrained in the cultural context. Guests try to be good guests, and hosts try to be good hosts — it's just taken for granted. In our story, David is trying to be a good host, a good king. He looks out and sees a *guest* in *his* land who lacks adequate shelter. He thinks about what a good host would do — provide shelter — and he does it. Or at least, he tries to do it.

There's just one problem, though: God isn't a guest in David's land. David has forgotten that "the earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it." He has forgotten that it's *all* God's land — David's kingdom, every other kingdom... wild, unexplored places where there is no kingdom or king. God is not David's guest. God is the host.

So rather than indulge David politely, rather than give David another pet project to boost his growing ego, God turns the tables. David becomes the guest, the recipient. God becomes the giver. God reminds David of all that he has done for him. And God bestows the incredible honor of an unending royal dynasty in his name to this poor, shepherd boy-turned-ruler.

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Hospitality is also central to Christian faith and worship. Have you noticed that? There's a reason our weekly services, in non-COVID times at least, culminate in the sharing of a meal. We dine at God's table, we eat and drink what He, the Host, has prepared for us. And we give thanks. This is our weekly work, our liturgy. In fact, there's a reason the bread in the Eucharistic meal is called the "host." *For in receiving the bread, in receiving God's good gift, we are receiving the Host himself.* There is no better time to rehearse this drama of hospitality, to enter into the transformative dance between guest and host, than at Christmastime.

This is a busy time of year, friends, I know. There is so much good work to be done: giving to our families and friends, helping the needy, and serving God. We tend to be more comfortable doing the giving, the helping, the serving. But that's not the whole story. That's only one role in the drama, half the dance. We must not settle for a Christmas that is left incomplete. The first task of Christians during this season is not do good things for God, well-intentioned as they may be. Our *first* task is to become the kind of people who recognize God as host, not guest; as giver, not receiver. Our work is to fix our eyes upon Christ himself, God made flesh, who has come into this world — yes, as guest: as the ultimate stranger and outsider, as an infant in need of a warm place to sleep — but also as host, as Giver, AND as the very *gift of God*. This is the mystery of the Eucharist. This is the mystery of the incarnation. It's the mystery of Christmas.

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A very wise mentor once said something to my wife and me that I'll never forget. We had kept her young daughter for an afternoon, or done some other favor for her, and she was trying to pay us for our work. And we were doing the whole "politely decline" act that we all do when friends offer to pay us for things: "no, no, no, it's nothing." Don't you hate that awkward game? I mean, I HATE it. It's terrible. And it's even worse around the holidays. Have you ever

encountered the living nightmare of having someone give you a Christmas present when you didn't get them anything? It is an excruciating form of torture!)

Well our friend knew that Sarah and I needed the money; we were both in school at the time. So she kept insisting, and finally, with a sincere and mildly frustrated look on her face, she shifted from a "friend" tone of voice to her "mentor" voice, and said: "You must learn how to receive."

Brothers and sisters, we must learn how to receive. Whatever we otherwise occupy ourselves with in the time we have, we must not neglect this task. Because when our earthly lives are over, when all of our projects and schemes come to an end, when our kingdoms crumble, we will still have an eternity of receiving to do from the good Giver who longs to host us at his table, in the place he is preparing for us. And it will just be plain awkward if we end up playing the "no, no, I really can't" game with God for all eternity. :)

Our souls require much work. We are not naturally good at this! Fortunately we have time to learn. But I have noticed something. There are two groups of people who seem to be better than most at receiving, people to whom we might want to apprentice ourselves as we engage in this soul-shaping discipline: those are the poor, and the young. ... And the Mother Mary was both. Perhaps that is not an accidental detail of history for the mother of the heir of David's throne.

"Then Mary said, 'Here I am, the servant of the LORD; let it be with me according to your word.'"

Friends, I pray that you might discover anew your own poverty before God this season. I pray that you might encounter — with childlike *amazement* — the joy and wonder of receiving a good gift as you contemplate Christ's miraculous arrival in this broken world.

Thanks be to God, our Giver, our Host, and our Deliverer. Amen.