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Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Miracle of God’s New Dwelling”

Text: Luke 1:26-38 (2 Samuel 7:1-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

At this time of the year, it is especially easy to get caught up in the “bigger is better, more is better” kind of thinking. We like to have nice things, we like to give nice things, and stores and advertisers and credit card companies certainly don’t try to discourage us from doing so! ‘Tis the season!

Well, in the Old Testament reading this evening, it seems as if King David got caught up in this kind of thinking as well. (It doesn’t just happen at Christmas!) He had just built himself a magnificent palace in Jerusalem. God had given them rest from all their enemies. The boundaries of his kingdom had grown and expanded so that Israel was larger than she had ever been before. Life was good. . . . But then David saw the Ark of God, the Ark of the Covenant – its dwelling place was still the Tabernacle, a tent. And perhaps it was showing signs of wear and tear. After all, it had been carried around the wilderness for 40 years after being built at Mt. Sinai. It was carried across the Jordan and into the Promised Land, carried around Jericho, moved to Shechem . . . and perhaps despite their best attempts to maintain it, perhaps it was becoming a bit frayed around the edges. Perhaps a bit faded. Perhaps looking its age. . . . And when David looked at his brand-spanking-new, magnificent palace, and then looked at the Tabernacle, it didn’t seem right! God needs bigger! God needs better! God needs more magnificent! And so even though God never complained about the Tabernacle, David begins plans to build a Temple for God. And it would be the most magnificent building in all of Jerusalem – or maybe, in his thinking, in all the world! – to match the glory and magnificence of God!

Now, I’m not criticizing David here. His heart was certainly in the right place. And there are many people today who think like David, including you and I. We like big churches, with impressive pipe organs and choirs, with grand decorations for Christmas, an impressive processional, and so full that you have to set up chairs in the aisles to accommodate all the people. And there is nothing wrong with those things. We want the best for God. Our hearts are in the right place.

But it is important to know that what we have in mind is not always what God has in

mind. And that was certainly true in the case of David. And so God did not allow David to build this Temple. There was nothing wrong with the idea – for God did eventually allow this Temple to be built, by David’s son Solomon. But by telling David no, and by delaying its construction, God wanted His people to know that while the Tabernacle *would* one day be replaced, it would not be by something of man’s choosing, or man’s design, or man’s construction. It would again be a “tent” of God’s choosing and design, and humble. For God’s glory and majesty do not depend on the enormity or magnificence of earthly things – His glory and majesty exalt the humble and poor, and lower the proud and mighty.

And so in the Holy Gospel for today, we hear of the new dwelling for God that *God Himself* has chosen. And so when God decided the time was right, He acted by sending His messenger, the angel Gabriel. But Gabriel did not go to a royal palace, or a king or high priest, but **“to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph.”** And this took place not in the capital city of Jerusalem, but in the backwater town of Nazareth. . . . And so it would not be powerful King David who would build His new dwelling, but a little, poor maiden named Mary. It would not be a dwelling of stone and cedar, but a dwelling of flesh and bone. And it would not be a dwelling admired by everyone, but instead mocked and ridiculed, called illegitimate and demon-possessed. . . . And this – this man, humble and ordinary-looking, whose name was to be Jesus, would be God’s new dwelling place on earth – His new “tent.” For as John tells us in His Gospel, **“And the Word became flesh and dwelled”** – or literally ‘tented’ – **“among us.”**

But the “David” in us doesn’t go down so easily! Especially at this time of the year, with our “bigger and better” thinking, as we get caught up in the holiday season, we tend to distort a bit, the Christmas story. We idealize, or romanticize, what happened to Mary and Joseph and the trip to Bethlehem and Jesus’ birth. We’re like King David, and we want to “build up” the story to the size and magnificence and glory worthy of the birth of the Son of God! And so Joseph and Mary become figures larger than life, instead of the struggling, fear-filled couple they were. The trip to Bethlehem becomes a romantic trip through the countryside, instead of the hard, dangerous, and treacherous trek that it was. And the stable becomes a warm, cozy, firelit place, instead of the cold, dank cave it probably was. . . . And so too, perhaps, our consideration of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is colored by our mistaken thinking. For as Luther once remarked: A virgin giving birth is indeed a wondrous thing; and God becoming man is an even greater miracle; but we do not want to overlook a third miracle that took place here, and that is *“that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her.”* And this last miracle is by no means the least of the three!

For consider the cold, plain facts of this story, as it is told to us by Luke. First of all, we

know that the angel Gabriel was sent with this message to Mary – but did Mary know it was an angel? We're not told that she did, and, in fact, it appears that she did not! For all throughout the Scriptures, whenever an angel appears to a human as an angel, it provokes great fear. But while Mary was greatly troubled, it was not at the appearance of the angel, it was by what he said. And so as not to romanticize the story, perhaps Gabriel came to her in human form, as we read angels often did. . . . And then, why her? A young maid, perhaps an orphan, a mere servant from the nothing town of Nazareth. Why should she believe that she would be chosen for such a great thing? . . . And even if she were chosen, how could her son grow up to be anything – especially a king? Reigning on the great throne of David, with no end to his kingdom! As a servant girl from Nazareth, she would be fortunate to be able to provide him with even a modest upbringing. . . . And then to top it all off, she was a virgin, for crying-out-loud! And everybody knows that virgins betrothed to be married do not have babies. Virgins betrothed to be married that are found with child were stoned! They are certainly not honored or favored! . . . And so why should Mary believe any of this? It's ludicrous, really! Obviously, this man, this angel, is mistaken. He has come with his fantastic message to the wrong house. Sir, check your address again!

And yet she believed. Even though it meant hardship for her and a quite uncertain future. Even though it was beyond common sense and took a mighty reach of faith to believe what she had just heard. Even though she couldn't figure everything out and was **“greatly troubled”** . . . she believed. And this miracle is by no means the least of the three.

But why do we have trouble believing that Mary's believing was a miracle? Why do we want to give her more credit and build her up “bigger and better?” . . . Perhaps we want to give her more credit for believing because we want more credit for believing. But the truth is that for you and me, just as with Mary, **faith is a miracle**. *“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.”* . . . For consider the cold, plain facts of your story – why did God choose you to be His child? Is it because you are so great? Is it because you are not so bad a sinner as the next guy? Is it because His kingdom and church is benefiting so greatly by your being here, as if God couldn't do it without you? Why would He send His Son to die for you? . . . And why did He choose me and send me here as your pastor? There are better preachers, better administrators, better evangelists, better teachers. Why has He done any of this for us? Because we so richly deserve it? . . . And while we're at it, how can we believe that by hearing words read from a book that we are hearing the Voice of God? How can we believe that water poured on a head washes away sins, or that by eating bread and wine we are eating the very, true body and blood of a man who lived some 2,000 years ago? . . . How can we possibly smugly sit there – or stand here – and think that we made a

“decision” to believe that all of this is true?! . . . Well Mary didn’t either!

But looking at this story – and at our story – realistically, does not diminish the greatness of the story! In fact, it increases it! Because it is all God’s doing. Like King David, we have our own plans and ideas about how things should be. But we are sinners. Even on our best days we are seeking our own glory. And apart from God, even our best works are tainted by the stain of sin. . . . But the depth of our sin shows the depth of God’s love and forgiveness. Our weakness shows His strength. Our great need shows His great mercy.

And so the wonder of Christmas is that it is all God’s doing. No human being could ever have conceived of such a plan. We would have gone for bigger and better, instead of smaller and more humble. But long before David came up with his plan, God had His plan, and it included a tent of flesh for His Son, a young virgin named Mary as its architect, and the miracle of faith to believe that this could be so. And His plan included giving us the gift of faith to believe that all of this is not only true, but is true for us.

And so a virgin believes and conceives . . .

for nothing is impossible with God.

The Son of God, begotten without a mother, is now conceived without a father . . .

for nothing is impossible with God.

The One who gives life dies, so that we who die might have life . . .

for nothing is impossible with God.

And we once born with sin are born again in forgiveness . . .

for nothing is impossible with God.

Merry Christmas!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen