

25 March 2012
Lent 5 / The Annunciation of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Love Unknown, Now Known in Christ”
Text: Hebrews 10:4-10 (Isaiah 7:10-14; Luke 1:26-38)

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

Usually, today, our crucifix would be veiled, and we would stop singing the Gloria Patri (“Glory be to the Father . . .”) at the end of our psalms and canticles. *Usually*, because today, the Fifth Sunday in Lent, is the beginning of Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent. When we began the Lenten season, we began a “liturgical fast” from alleluias, from the Gloria in Excelsis (the hymn of praise for this season, which we sing after the Introit), and from much of the chanting during the Communion liturgy. It is a reminder of the austerity of this penitential season. And with Passiontide, we - *usually* - lose a little more. For we are on the verge of Holy Week. We are very close, now, to the remembrance of our Lord’s crucifixion.

Usually, that’s what happens.

But as you can see and as you heard, not today. *Not yet*. Because today is not just the Fifth Sunday in Lent, it is also March 25 - or *exactly* 9 months before Christmas. Which means today is the day the church celebrates the Annunciation - the day when the angel Gabriel came to the virgin Mary, announced to her that she was the one chosen by God to be the mother of our Saviour, and by the powerful, creative, Spirit-filled Word, Jesus was conceived in her womb. ***Let it be to me according to your word***, she responded. According to God’s Word. And so exactly 9 months before Christmas - the perfect amount of time for the development and growth of the perfect man, the church remembers. Christmas is the day we celebrate Jesus’ birth, but today we celebrate the beginning of His life. His life for you and me.

And so the readings we heard today were familiar ones; ones that we often hear before Christmas. But hearing them now, so close to the crucifixion of our Lord, we *hear them differently* - for we are not preparing to celebrate His birth, but His death. Today reminds us that those two go together. That our Saviour was born to die. That is different than you and me. We are born and look forward to a long and productive and hopefully happy life. We know we will die someday, someday - unless Jesus returns first! - but for us, birth is about life. But Jesus was born to die. It is not just the end of His life, *it is the reason for it*.

And it was the words we heard from the book of Hebrews today that brings this all together:

***Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.” . . .
we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for
all.***

Those verses confuse folks sometimes, because, well, didn't God prescribe and command sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament? Well, yes, but it's not what He desired, and He took no delight or pleasure in them. **They are not what He wanted, they are what we needed.** What God desired from the beginning was men and women created in His image to live in that image - giving, loving, and serving like our Father in heaven. But that's not what He got. He got, instead, men and women who like taking instead of giving, who look to our own interests instead of the interests of others, and who think this world would be a better place if only everyone was just like me!

For how do we use the body the Lord has prepared and given to us? Our eyes look in lust and anger, and little in love. Our ears love to hear juicy gossip, but how often does the good go in one ear and out the other? How often do our mouths curse instead of bless, our hands hurt instead of help, and our minds think not the best, but the worst, about others? And with what do our hearts beat: with mercy and compassion, or selfishness and greed? And that's just scratching the surface, but you get the idea. And so God gave the sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament - that there be a means of forgiveness for His people.

But since, as the author of Hebrews wrote, ***it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins***, the Lord prepared **another body** to do just that. To fulfill not just what bulls and goats, *but also what you and I*, could not do. **A body to give the service the Lord wanted, and to be the sacrifice we needed.** That body conceived in a virgin, not through natural means, but by the Word of God. That body that was the Word made flesh.

And so to do what you and I could not do, the Son of God became like us in every way. He didn't just come and assume a full-grown, 30 year old, adult body, but began as a single cell, just like us. He grew in the womb just like us, and was born just like us. He was an infant and then a toddler, a child and then a teenager, and finally an adult, just like us. Except without sin. And so through every stage of life, He offered to God that service that we do not - theologians call it His *active obedience* - a perfect life, of perfect love, of perfectly reflecting the image of God.

A life of mercy and compassion, using His eyes, ears, mouth, hands, mind, and heart - all His body, all His being, in true service to God. And having bound Himself to us in every stage of life, that no matter how old or young you are, pre-born, newborn, or long ago born, Jesus has fulfilled the desire of His Father for you; He fulfilled what all of us, bound in sin, are unable to do.

And then, not only to fill up what we are lacking, but to do what the blood of bulls and goats could not do, to take away and atone for all we have done, He became the sacrifice we needed. That through what theology calls His *passive obedience*, the offering of His perfect body and blood on the cross, He would sanctify us, making us pure and holy through the forgiveness of our sins. Through those wonderful, marvelous words: Father, forgive them. He doesn't hold the cross *against* you; He went there and stayed there *for* you.

That's the "love unknown" that we sang about (LSB #430). *Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be*. Loving not those who deserve it, but those who don't. Dying not for your friends, but for your enemies. And not to rehabilitate us, but to raise us from the death of sin to new life in Him. To restore in us the image of God and the right use of our bodies, minds, and spirits.

And so in the body prepared for Him and given this day as it began to grow and develop in the womb of the virgin, He lived our life and died our death. For perfect in every way, He was able to bear not His own sins, but our sins and the sins of the whole world - from the beginning of time to the end of time - on the cross, to atone for them; to be the true sacrifice and offering for them. He became homeless for us homeless and dead for us dead, that we might have His home and rise from death in His life. To live . . . how does the Small Catechism put it? *To live before Him in righteousness and purity forever*.

And that's the life you have now begun to live - a life of righteousness and purity. A life where the words of Mary, ***let it be to me according to your Word***, have begun to be fulfilled *in you*. For when you were baptized, the Word of God came to you and conceived a new life in you, that by water and the Word, physical and spiritual, body and soul, you live a new life. An image of God life. A life of faith and love. No longer the old faith-in-yourself and loving-yourself life, and expecting others to do the same; but now a life of faith toward God and love towards others. As the One who did that perfectly, Jesus, now lives in you. As that life now grows and matures in you, as you drink the living water of God's Word and Spirit and forgiveness; as you eat the food He has provided to nourish and sustain you - His very body and blood. ***To sanctify you*** through the body and blood ***Jesus offered for you***.

And so now those words - ***let it be to me according to your Word*** - are not just the

words spoken by Mary, but words spoken by you. Words of faith. Words that come only from knowing that love unknown. From knowing that our Lord didn't just take on human flesh for as long as He had to, and then shook it off and discarded it as quickly as He could! Like taking off an uncomfortable necktie, or pantyhose, or collars for us pastors. No, that's not it at all. The Annunciation was not something God grudgingly did, but lovingly did! The Annunciation was not just a great day *for us*, it was a great day for God also! The incarnation is something that God really wanted to do! To become man, so that God and man could live together forever. As one flesh. Christ and His Bride, the Church, truly united, forever.

For that was always the plan. From the beginning, when God created all things. He created us for life with Him, not life apart from Him or without Him. And with that love He has always loved you. That love unknown in the beginning, that love unknown that became flesh, and that love unknown that will be fulfilled in the end. And as you have now received that love, so now live that love.

We started the service today by singing an Advent hymn: *Savior of the Nations, Come!* (LSB #332) And He did, and He does, and He will. First in the manger, now on the altar, and finally in glory. Now, in these next two weeks, Advent will reach its fulfillment, as our Saviour who came, the very Son of God, ascends the cross, rests in the tomb, and bursts the bonds of the grave . . . all *for you*. He didn't need it; you did. So He did it. All of it. For you. That's love. A love now no longer unknown, but known. Revealed to us in Jesus.

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

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