

Homilies for the Fourth Sunday of Advent:

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Blessed Is The Woman Who Has Believed

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Some years ago, at a seminar on preaching, a lady theologian offered a gracious but telling critique of a homily of mine, "Advent with Mary." In the course of her critique she gave a sound reason why such a homily is best preached by a woman. Why? Because the Advent Mary is the pregnant Mary. And so, if experience is a factor in effective preaching, we would do well to listen to the daughters of Eve during these four pregnant weeks.

I agree, and I do listen. But, given the unfortunate factual situation-ordained but not pregnant-let this male presume to speak to you of our Lady, of Advent with Mary. I shall speak of her as Luke understands her, and with insights from gifted women.

Remember, we are still in Advent, still waiting with Mary for the most remarkable, most influential birth in human history. Three movements to my musings, three questions stimulated by today's Gospel: (1) How did Mary wait for Jesus that first Advent? (2) What did her kinswoman Elizabeth reveal to us that is so important about the pregnant Mary? (3) What might all this say to you and me about our own Advent, our waiting for Jesus? First, how did Mary wait for Jesus that first Advent? Today's Gospel is revealing.

Pregnant, she does not retire into isolation; she goes into the hill country of Judea to visit a relative, Elizabeth, wife of high priest Zechariah. Why? Angel Gabriel had told her that Elizabeth was six months pregnant. So what? Well, Elizabeth was getting on in years, had been believed to be barren, had hidden her pregnancy for five months.

Now we the graying among Catholics have been told from childhood why Mary went visiting: She wanted to congratulate Elizabeth on her unexpected pregnancy, help the aging lady her last few months with child. I've preached that myself. My female critic sees it differently: Mary was seeking "support from another woman," "from another pregnant woman. It makes sense. This young woman had never been pregnant; she was pregnant not by Joseph but by God's creative and active power; she was to mother the "Son of God" (Lk 1:35). She could hardly tell that story to any of her down-to-earth female friends in backwater Nazareth: "Gather round, ladies: I've just been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit!" Whom to tell but another woman some distance away, an older woman, a relative, "just before God" (Lk 1:6), beyond childbearing age, a woman also surprised by joy, surprised by God.

Mary pregnant with the All-Holy is not a confident, self-assured, triumphant queen of heaven. She is young, perhaps an adolescent, probably confused when Gabriel leaves her without a script for the future, not knowing quite what to do next, even how to tell Joseph.

Enough on why Mary went visiting. But that is hardly the whole story-Mary pregnant, Elizabeth pregnant, Mary seeking support from Elizabeth. Support she receives, but far beyond her imagining. As soon as Mary entered Elizabeth's home, "the child in [Elizabeth's] womb," John, the Baptizer to be, "leaped with delight" (Lk 1:41, 44). By a miracle of grace, the unborn child recognizes not his cousin but his Lord. "Filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 41), Elizabeth recognizes not only her kinswoman but the mother of her Lord: "Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (v. 43). But Elizabeth is not finished. "Blessed indeed," she cries, "blessed is the woman who has believed that what the Lord has promised her will see fulfilment" (v. 45). Here is our Lady at her most remarkable: She believed. She trusted that what God had promised her through an angel would be realized. But listen to what God had promised: "You are going to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great and will be hailed as Son of the Most High,... and of his kingship there will be no end" (Lk 1:31-33).

Reflect on the utter trust in Mary's simple response to the angel, "Let it be with me as you say" (Lk 1:38). Gabriel had not left her with a "Here is your life" scenario. No details whatsoever. He never told her she would become a refugee with her infant to escape a king's anger. Never told her that, when her child grew up, some of his relatives would think him mad, that the people of Nazareth would try to cast him over a cliff. Never told her what aging Simeon foretold later, "This child is marked for the fall and the rise of many in Israel, to be a symbol that will be rejected-indeed, a sword shall pierce you too" (Lk 2:34-35). Never told her that some of his fellow Jews would charge Jesus with having a devil, that one of his closest friends would betray him with a kiss, that he would die shamefully on a cross between two thieves, but not to worry, for he would rise again shortly. Why, Gabriel never taught her a single thing about the Trinity, what it really meant to be unique Son of God; never a cram course in Christology, how one could be God and human in one and the same person.

God asked of Mary only this, "Trust me." And she did. Totally. That is why Luke sees in Mary a perfect disciple. Jesus would make that clear later on: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21). Mary listened and Mary did. Little wonder that in Christian tradition Mary has long been seen as the "woman of faith." Listen to St. Augustine: "Mary full of faith conceived Christ in her heart before she conceived him in her womb." In fact, Augustine insists that it was precisely by her believing that Mary conceived Christ in her flesh. She believed, and in believing she conceived. "In other words, the human act whereby she conceived her Son was not an act of loving union with her husband but an act of loving faith in God." What did she do to conceive Christ? Very simply, she made an act of faith. She said yes to God, without reservation: Whatever you want, dear Lord.

III

Why this accent on Mary believing? It raises my third question: What might all this say to you and me about our own Advent, our waiting for Christ? In a word, we too are asked to believe; Advent for us is preparation for a strong act of faith. But be careful! Not only an act of intellect- I accept with my mind what God has revealed to us: The infant in that stable is the unique Son of God, God in our flesh. Important, of course; our Christian living, our Christian dying, depends on it. If that child is not God as truly as the Father is God, our worship here, our Eucharist, is dreadful deception, a horrible hoax. We might as well go home, get what comfort we can at eight o'clock from TV's "Touched by an Angel," give place of honor on Thursday to Santa Claus.

No, Christmas is the incredible creed you will shortly utter together: "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, God from God, one in Being with the Father, through [whom] all

things were made, [who] for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit was born of the Virgin Mary and became" as human as you and I.

And still, for all its splendor, that affirmation is only a beginning of my faith; an important truth, but not the whole truth. With that response of my intellect must go a response of my whole person: an act of trust similar to our Lady's. I must trust, as Mary trusted, that "what the Lord has promised [me] will be fulfilled," will come to pass, will be realized. Not easy. As with Mary, so with you and me. In Christ, God has not provided us with a scenario for our lives, what will happen to any one of us. God did not tell us what color would grace our faces, what manner of children would be born of us, whether we shall live in poverty or plenty, in love or rage, when we shall die and how. I cannot predict my tomorrow.

What, then, has God promised in that Child of Bethlehem? That the God who wore our flesh will never abandon us, will always be there for us, no matter how absent he seems, how far away, no matter how far we stray, how faithless we become. That even if we desert him, he will never wave good-bye to us. "The power of the Most High," God's holy Spirit, will always "cast a shadow over you" (Lk 1:35), the shadow that is a sign of God's presence.

The theology is clear enough; let me bring it down to earth. Two stories that unexpectedly came together. First true story: I heard it two decades ago in Nassau from a Bahamian priest, and in 1979 I used it in Georgetown's Dahlgren Chapel to end a homily on trust. A two-story house had caught fire. The family-father, mother, several children-were on their way out when the smallest boy became terrified, tore away from his mother, ran back upstairs. Suddenly he appeared at a smoke-filled window crying like crazy. His father, outside, shouted to him, "Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you." The boy cried, "But, daddy, I can't see you." "I know," his father called, "I know. But I can see you."

Second story: a letter to me dated last Sunday, from a lady in Chevy Chase who had just heard me speak at Blessed Sacrament parish. I quote word for word.

When my sister Kathleen was diagnosed with cancer, we began walking each noontime for an hour, and you were a part of that ritual. We read and used as the fabric of that year's long journey [your homilies]. Some [of them] spoke eloquently [to us]. When she was at the very end and unconscious, my brother-in-law asked me if I could say something. We, my mother, my sisters Anne Miskovsky and Mary Stahlman had recited all our traditional prayers and still Kathy fought to stay with her young family. I remembered your fire homily and I said, "Jump, [Kathy]. He can see you." She died quietly.

Advent with Mary? When the chips are down, leap down from the theology. Like Mary, jump! It's a replay of Jesus on the cross: "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit" (Lk 23:46), the whole of my living self. And not only in a foxhole, not only at the very end; now, tomorrow, each night falling asleep. It's your advent, your coming to Christ; it's your response to his Christmas, to his coming to you. Whether you can see him is not all-important. He can see you; he does ... always. Jump!

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Fourth Sunday of Advent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)**SCRIPTURE: Micah 5:1-4a; Hebrews 10: 5-10; Luke 1:39-45**

This fourth Sunday of Advent marks the close of our preparation for the great feast of the Incarnation. I would like for you to work with me today on getting in touch with the heart of this mystery called the Incarnation. One of the things I say to you often is that we have grown up with images of the Scriptures, particularly this image of God becoming one of us. With familiarity with this image and having heard of it from the beginning, it loses some of its impact in terms of the awe and wonder it should create in us. Probably the only way we could have felt it the way it was meant to be felt is if we could have heard it for the first time after living for a very long time under a completely different system than the system Christ came to establish. The beginning of this new way, this Good News, this kingdom Jesus came to establish, was so awesome and so unbelievable that Jesus himself would refer to it as a "stumbling block." When people finally heard what God had planned to do from the beginning for his people, they simply could not digest it. They couldn't take it in. They couldn't understand it. That was especially true for the religious leaders of the time because they were set in a system very different from the system Christ came to establish. I want to talk about the differences between those two systems. I also want to talk about the awesome, exciting concept that this feast of Christmas offers us.

The piece of music chosen for today's program, the song "Tomorrow Will Be My Dancing Day," by Chanticleer is a good introduction. It is a song much like the Song of Songs, the poetry in the Scripture. There is a wonderful relationship between God and his people. The relationship is described as the relationship between a male lover and his beloved. In that wonderful book of Scripture, the Song of Songs, which we just read in this fourth week of Advent, is a wonderful meditation on one of the ways to imagine the relationship God longs to have with us. God is like a lover who longs to connect with all of us. One of the things in the poem that is so beautiful is the way in which the lover invites his beloved to come out of the dark recesses of a cliff and to enter into the light. He does it by telling her of the beauty she possesses, because she doubts it. There is something about that image that is so intriguing to me in terms of helping me to understand what the Incarnation is fundamentally all about: It is God coming into the world to have a relationship with you and me. In that relationship, he longs to affirm the goodness within us, and he invites us to live in that goodness with great confidence. And to endure all of those negative issues that are struggling to reach us and rob us of what I would call "our lives." The inheritance of goodness that is ours from the beginning, promised to us by God. The song from Chanticleer is an image of this Jesus figure coming into the world, taking on human nature, so that he can tap us on the shoulder, lift us from our place of work and invite us to dance with him. "Please dance with me," Jesus is saying. "This is our dancing day." The reading from Hebrews gives us a good idea of the shift the Good News brings to us. The old system was all about sacrifice, about doing things for God, about working hard for God. If we can imagine working in something like a factory, laboring for this God and feeling good about it, knowing we were accomplishing something and that God was just and would pay us back for what we invested in terms of time and talent - it was a good system. There are all kinds of reasons why the law is an important element in the whole system. We need to have things asked of us and demanded of us. There is a need for right order. But that is not the heart of the relationship God has always longed to have with his people.

God doesn't want us to be working for him. In the letter to the Hebrews, we hear that Christ came into the world to say something. What Christ is basically saying is that sacrifice and offering and all this work are not ultimately the relationship he wants to have with us. In fact, all of the sacrifices and offerings are unnecessary, in a sense. It's because of what Jesus is doing. He is coming into the world, taking on the form of a man, and he will offer himself. When I think about God not asking us any longer to make sacrifices for our sins, that always has created a feeling in me that God was a God who needed to be paid back for the negative things that were being done to him and to the world. God needed a little bit of revenge. He wanted something back for what was done negatively. He demanded it. This is a God, I thought, who demands blood. Then Jesus comes into the world, and this God who really does demand a lot of blood, says, "I am going to take this perfect one, this really good and innocent man, and squash him. Then his blood will pay back all the evil that has been done." That would further reinforce the idea in our imaginations, perhaps, that this God of ours is bloodthirsty. Our sacrifice wasn't good enough, so maybe Jesus' sacrifice is better. I think we need to clarify that the figure of Jesus is God. There's no way we can imagine that Jesus offering himself to the Father is like another person offering himself to the Father.

What I really believe we find in this incredible image of Christ sacrificing himself is an image of God sacrificing himself for us. It's a radical shift. It's moving away from the idea that we have to do something to make up for our sins to God doing something to make up for our sins. Then, the relationship shifts radically. All of a sudden, we have a God we are no longer focused on working for; we are in awe of a God who comes into focus as one who is working for us. A servant-God. That's what Jesus comes into the world to get us to see: A servant-God has entered onto the scene. It changes everything. It changes the nature of our relationship with God. Suddenly, we become the recipients of an extraordinary gift. What have we done to deserve this gift? Nothing. How do we continue to deserve it? Not by earning it. By simply receiving it. By being open to it. By trusting that it is real. By trusting it is true. And by letting it come in. There is an interesting facet to the whole concept of the Incarnation. The way Jesus was born into the world was anything but the way people thought God would come into the world. He comes to Bethlehem, this tiny no-place. In the reading from Micah, the prophet predicts seven-hundred-plus years before the event that there will be this extraordinary shepherd who will come into the world to lead God's people and to bring them to a place of peace. He says this figure will come to this tiny place. Two things intrigue me about the passage from Micah: One is that this whole story of our redemption is not an accidental, by chance, event. It was destined to be the way it was. It was destined to happen when it happened. If seven-hundred-plus years before it happened someone was talking about it, then it gives me chills to think that there was this kind of plan that was unfolding. This plan is for us. Why didn't we receive this gift in the beginning? Why didn't Adam and Eve receive the redemption as we have through a gift of God offering himself for us? I have no answer for that, other than to say that first it was necessary for us to experience what we experienced before the coming of Christ. It was a growth in consciousness and awareness for the human race so that we would be ready for this, more attentive to what it means. And more aware of the futility of trying to "earn" a relationship with God by our performance.

If there is something clear in the Old Testament, it's the simple truth that God asked us to do the things the law required and every time we set out to do it - even those who were extraordinarily gifted - always experienced failure. It's like we needed centuries of

experiences of struggling to do it the way we still think we should do it. We do the right things to get the right reward. It needed to be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that this simply would not work. There is a humility in all of this that is so healing. I love to think that on my own and through discipline I can accomplish great things. But I don't realize sometimes that the gifts I have, the ways I am able to reach whatever level of growth that I can - even those are gifts to me. How horrible it is when I judge myself or criticize others, not ever knowing what talent or strength they had to start with in the beginning. Not knowing their background or the experiences that might have enhanced or diminished their capacity to love or to be open to the spiritual world. It's frightening the way we compare ourselves to each other when we are not really comparing apples to apples! That's why Jesus wanted us to realize that the fundamental thing we have to focus on in Christianity is that we have a God who is inviting us to be open to new life. Only God can pour this life into us. The way God pours this life into us is by loving us.

It's fascinating to me that throughout the season of Advent we have talked about more pregnant women than during any other time of the year. It's obvious because of Mary's pregnancy and Jesus coming into the world. What I love about the stories is when you lay them all out and look at them, there is always something that involves a unique twist. The woman becoming pregnant by all rights and circumstances should not have become pregnant. Either she is too old, like Sarah, way beyond the age of childbearing. In the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who gave birth to John, they are way beyond the years of childbearing. Elizabeth had been barren for so long. Mary, obviously going through something so extraordinary with her pregnancy that nobody would believe it. All of a sudden, she became pregnant. What is all that about? I believe it is trying to teach us that this way of being we are being invited to enter into, this way of seeing God as our lover - a God who wants to enter into us and give us energy that creates new life in us - has tremendous blocks and obstacles. It almost always comes in a way that is not expected. It comes against all odds. I love that thought! It's like this isn't the normal course of events. The normal course of events in the spiritual life would be that we would go and do our homework and study and reflect. The harder we would study and reflect, the more we would know. The more we would discipline ourselves, the more we would become holy. That's logical. But it doesn't work that way. The spiritual life is gift. It comes out of nowhere; it comes at unexpected times. Always it seems that when it comes, it demands one, fundamental thing: Absolute trust.

Elizabeth's words to Mary in this gospel are so key: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Mary's act of faith is so often not felt in its fullness. If someone came to me today and said, "You know I had this dream. I've never known anyone intimately, but now I am pregnant. Out of this dream came this pregnancy." I would think, "Probably not." But I might humor them and say, "Whatever happened we will forgive you for this and help you through this." When Mary lived, there were huge ramifications for someone who got pregnant outside of her betrothed state. She would be dragged to the temple, stripped, her hair unbraided, she would be humiliated publicly, and then taken to be stoned. That was what the law required. That was what the system - always geared toward making sure right activities were taking place and punishment levied to atone for sins - in this case, the woman. We have this awesome, fearful situation - and yet Mary trusts. She trusts that somehow she will be protected from this punishment. It had to be that. She had to believe somehow it would work. Joseph, her betrothed, an upright man who knew the law, does something to me that is a wonderful hint of what is coming. Here is a just man who knows all of the laws and the sacrifices that need to be made. He decides for the reason of right relationship and for some intuitive

reason, that he is going to ignore the law. The scandal. The stumbling block.

This God comes into the world to break the old system apart. Our challenge is to be open to the mystery of what this Incarnation event is really inviting us to enter into. Most intriguingly, it is inviting us to become pregnant. Male and female, all of us in this world are seen as the feminine element, and God is seen as the masculine element. So often, in the stories of Scripture, this God wants to dance with us. This God wants to impregnate us with his Spirit. These two women, Mary and Elizabeth, are symbols of all of us. Together, arm in arm, Mary and Elizabeth look at each other and are very excited about what is happening to them. This is a great image of the Church, the community of believers. This feeling completely overwhelms Elizabeth, and she cries out as Mary enters into the house, "Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb." That would be the equivalent of us saying, "Blessed are you in this room who are believers. How blessed we all are to have this gift of spiritual life within us." Sometimes I have been in liturgy where I feel an overwhelming sense of something that is transforming us. When we see it in the eyes of others and they see it our eyes, that makes liturgy so incredibly powerful and awesome. It's like two people looking at each other and saying, "Can you believe what is happening inside of us? The whole system we thought did the work is really not that important. The figure who is really doing the work is this God of ours who is doing it out of an intense desire to be part of us and to see something grow inside of us that will give birth to a new consciousness, a new awareness of a God who is truly with us."

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