

ARE YOU READY?

Luke 1:26-55

December 20, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 1:26-55 ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. ³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Here it is Christmas already. Seems to me that it was just last week that my family and I pushed our chairs back from Thanksgiving Dinner, and only shortly before that school began for the fall. A year always looks so luxuriously long from the perspective of January 1, but always compresses into a few dense hours toward the end of December. Time evaporates under pressure.

"Are you ready for Christmas?" someone asked me recently. Believe me, if Christmas waited until I was ready, it would never get here. It's my old narcissistic

impulses showing their ugly faces, wanting the world to stop while I catch my breath, needing to hold back the onrush of time according to my convenience, designing ways to be in control.

Christmas is yet another sign that God is no respecter of our schedules; God disdains appointments and just shows up at inconvenient times. Take Mary, for example. She had a life long before Luke came along and wrote her story. She had family, friends, and exciting plans for the future. Was she ready for that announcement from the angel? We're talking about a very young girl here, an adolescent probably, who was engaged but not married. Was she ready to hear she was pregnant? Was Joseph? Would you be?

We who like our Christmases carefully planned and smoothly run forget that God's gifts don't assume the shape we prefer nor are timed according to our convenience. Indeed, God's gifts may be at first unrecognizable, difficult to understand, and painful to experience. It should tell us something that this particular solution of God's to our human muddle did not arrive in gilded palace halls and born of a queen, or in an antiseptic maternity ward and born of a society matron, but came nestled in straw and wrapped in rags and entrusted to a young, poor, uneducated, single mother,

Are you ready for Christmas? I'm not asking about the commercial or cultural versions of Christmas, but the Christmas of rude jolts and sudden surprise, like the one Mary and Joseph endured. Are we ready for Christmas the way God gives it, or must it fall within our comfort zone? Our time, too, is pregnant with God's gifts, and the time will come when, ready or not, they will burst forth upon our lives with an intensity of grace and hope that cannot be stanchd by our refusals. The gift may be pleasing, it may be wrenching; will we be ready? Later, will we be grateful?

When I manage to look upon my life critically I realize how few of the life-forming experiences I have had depended upon my being ready for them. They came, certainly without asking, often without warning, but rarely without blessing. Even the bad stuff, the hard stuff, the painful, fearful stuff I now perceive as blessing. And, from this vantage point of spiritual distance and growth, they don't look so mean now, for I have learned from them, grown out of them, and have looked to the future better prepared.

The story of Mary runs from fright to joy, from tragedy to hope. From her we learn that happiness and fulfillment are not measured by how successfully we carried out our plans, but how faithfully we accepted the gracious intrusions of God's plans into our lives. Each day gives us the choice – we can fight and rage against life's unfairness or we can flow with what day gives and mine blessings from random mix of experience. This is faith, to be able to perceive blessings lying within the straw and to anticipate discovering grace in even the rudest places.

Christmas is not an abstraction of God's love; it is a lesson in living within the often inconvenient gifts of God. What about the real crises of our own lives? Don't we all know families for whom a pregnancy was the last thing they wanted, and which came at the worst possible time? Can't we tell stories of accidents, setbacks, tragedies and disappointments which shattered our well-organized schedules and required a whole new set of plans. You just get ahead a bit financially, and the car breaks, or the kids need braces, or the basement floods. Or, you reach that point in

career where to your dismay you realize you're no longer a promising young man or woman. Or, suddenly the company wants you to move, or the company wants you to leave. Or, you discover some spiritual worm has been at work in your marriage and the relationship has grown flat and stale. Or, someone very dear and very close becomes deathly ill or you face your own unhappy diagnosis.

"O no! Not this...!" we moan. And then we consider the choices: shall we act like victims and retreat into depression or shall we courageously see where this new "gift" shall take us? Our own list of intrusions can put Mary's dilemma in perspective. It may get us beyond the triumphalism of Christmas and back into its humanity. Only then can we truly explore the joy of Christmas, for at first it was anything but joy. It was fear and pain, embarrassment and confusion.

She could have let it all prey upon her mind, like so many of us are inclined to do, and become depressed and distracted. Instead, when life gave her a turn, she followed, and the event that began in distress became her glory.

Our lives hold so much surprise and randomness. We need a faith that speaks life's language, which speaks hope in the midst of tragedy and gratitude in the midst of joy. It is when we deny our pain that we suffer from it most. It is when we try to create little idealized sealed-off areas of existence and live in them that we lose touch with the richness and depth of life, just as we lose sight of the profundity of Christmas if it is only triumph and no pain, all glitter and gifts and no child bride and no straw.

We think we would like a world without pain or challenge. But what kind of Christmas would we have without the rude realities of the story? What kind of faith would we have without a cross? Christmas is a place, an event where we seek and find within the world's mix of blackness and light an enduring promise. In it we find joy. There we learn to hold fast to it, to seize its power to strengthen us in adversity, to lighten burdens, to increase what is good, and to bring us even unto life's conclusion with a confidence and a gratitude unshakable.