

The Fourth Sunday in Advent: God's Purpose Revealed

One: We light again the first three candles.

(Light first three candles.)

We remember our longing for God to be with us,
to give us peace, and to rejoice with us.

Two: Today, we light a fourth candle and our circle is complete

(Lights last blue candle.)

One: This candle is a symbol of God's love that was born anew
in baby Jesus on Christmas Day. It is a symbol of God's love
that is alive in us each day, too.

Two: It is a love that has no ending, that lives on in young and old,
not just at Christmas, but throughout the year.

All: Come, holy God, travel with us through Advent.

Give us courage to spread love in the world, now and forever. Amen.

Candle Hymn

"One Candle Is Lit"

--tune: CRADLE SONG

*Come wander where lion and lamb gently play,
where evil is banished and faith takes the day,
a babe in a manger to fool the world's eyes.
One candle is lit for God's loving surprise.*

Invitation to Confession

Advent is a season of waiting — a waiting that is anything but passive. As we prepare to make room for Christ to dwell within us, we acknowledge our own sin, which stands in the way of living the fullness of life God promises in Christ. Let us be truthful with God, in the presence of one another. Let us give God the gift of our honest and humble confession.

Confession Prayer and Silence

Ever present God, in the darkness of Mary's womb, the holy Child grows. In the darkness of the world's pain, the blessed light begins to kindle. In the darkness of our own doubting of you and our lack of faith in ourselves, the great hope begins to rise again like a lump in the throat.

Christ will be born again into our world and into us. O God, forgive the times we look with a cynical eye on the advent of peace in our world. Forgive us for doubting the light you have placed within each of us. Forgive us for ignoring the lump in our throats and the wonder of your love for us. With the birth of the Christ Child, let your forgiveness cleanse the darkness of our inner selves. And let the love of Christ shine in us like a star. Amen.

Silence

Sung Confession: Oh, come, Thou Key of David, come / And open wide our heavenly home:
Make safe the way that leads on high / And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, Shall come to thee, O Israel.

***Assurance of Forgiveness and God's Presence**

Hear the Good News! The Messiah comes to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. Jesus comes in many forms, even as he comes as a baby--to save us from our sin. Let us spread the Good News! Alleluia, Amen.

Passing of the Peace: One: The peace of Christ be with you all
All: **And also with you**

Sung Celebration: Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"

Joyful, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies;
With th'angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Refrain

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

Hail the heav'nly Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings, Ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.

Prayers of the People

Ancient of Days, who comes to us fresh as tomorrow and sure as dawn's bump of the horizon in early light, draw near now and wait with us. We wait for the return of glory, the advent of holy time, the birth of a child. Wait with us for the end of our regret, the rebirth of our joy, the time when old becomes new before our very eyes. Renew us. Give us patience. Let us remember how sure it is that weeping only endures for the night and joy returns in the morning. Let us remember the depth of our sadness on other occasions, and how surely you bring us back to gladness. Give this congregation the patience of Advent, that we may be confident of Christmas and of our future---but not rush it. Let time slow down now and, in holy patience, let us await you and your entrance into history, even our own. Amen.

The Gospel

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God."

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.

One: My heart sings
Two: with praise to God.
Three: My soul is glad

All: because of God my Saviour.

Two: For God has looked with favour
One: on me, God's servant.

Two: God has remembered me,
One: lowly though I am.

Three: God has not forgotten
Two: the plight of my people.

One: From this moment on
Two: I will be called
Three: blessed
Two: blessed
One: blessed

All: by all generations.

Two: Because the Mighty One
Three: has done great things for me.,

One: Holy is God's name!

Three: From one generation to another
Two: mercy is shown,
One: mercy is given,
Three: mercy is known
One: to all who honour God's name.

Two: God's mighty arm has reached
Three: the proud
Two: and scattered them,
One: rending all their plans for naught.

Two: God has brought the powerful
Three: down from their thrones,
One: down from their high and mighty places,
Two: down to the dust.

Three: Up from the dust
One: God has lifted the lowly,
Two: filling our bellies with good things.

Three: God has sent the rich away
Two: with nothing but empty hands.

Three: This was the promise made generations ago,

One: a promise to come to our help,
Two: a promise to come to our aid,
One: a promise to come to our deliverance,
Two: a promise made to our ancestors
Three: Abraham and Sarah
Two: and their descendants forever.

**All: My heart sings with praise to our God.
Blessed be God forever!**

Sermon

KNOCKOFF JESUS

Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade

"I like the Christmas Jesus best." That's what Will Ferrell says in the comedy *Talladega Nights*, when he is playing a stock car driver named Ricky Bobby. "Dear tiny Jesus," he says as he begins his prayer at a family meal. "Golden fleece diapers, with your tiny, fat, balled-up fist"

"Jesus *did* grow up," his wife reminds him. "You don't always have to call him baby."

"I like the Christmas Jesus best when I'm saying grace," he insists. And so he continues his prayer, "Dear 8 lb., 6 oz., newborn infant Jesus. Don't even know a word yet. Just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent Thank you for all your power and your grace, dear baby God. Amen."

Now we might laugh at Will Ferrell, but the truth is that *we* like the Christmas Jesus, too. As my friends at Homiletics Magazine point out this week---we love to sing "Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head." We get excited when we "Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!" We enjoy Christmas pageants with glittery stars and shepherds in bathrobes, along with the chance to join our voices in "Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright, Round yon virgin mother and child! Holy Infant, so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace."

We like the Christmas Jesus best.

But what if this tiny infant that we love so dearly is a bit of a knockoff? Not a fake, but a version that's not quite as valuable as the original. The problem with knockoffs is that they can take our focus off the genuine article.

In Manhattan, a battle is raging between designers of high-fashion clothing and manufacturers who create knockoffs. A designer dress will cost you \$750, while a quality copy can be purchased for \$260. One of the creators of these knockoffs, Seema Anand, tells *The New York Times* (September 4, 2007), “If I see something on Style.com, all I have to do is e-mail the picture to my factory and say, ‘I want something similar.’” Her factory in India works fast, and can deliver a knockoff even before the designer version is available in stores.

Is this a problem? Some say no, with designer fashions so ridiculously expensive. Paying \$750 for a dress? Fit *that* into your Christmas budget! And why pay \$300 for designer jeans if you can get something similar for \$30? But the Council of Fashion Designers wants copyright protection to be extended to clothing, so that good designs will not be stolen. Others argue that copyright laws are for the good of the public – not the pocketbooks of high-end designers.

Until this issue gets resolved, knockoffs will be big business. In India, Seema Anand’s factory has computer programs that can copy the design of a garment from a Web image. The factory’s 2,000 workers can produce finished samples within two weeks, and “sometimes it looks so great you’re just shocked,” says Seema Anand. But she admits sometimes the copies are, quite frankly, awful.

This is certainly one of the challenges for us at Christmas: to separate the Knockoff Jesus from the genuine article. It is a tension that has existed for as long as we have celebrated Christmas. We can’t let the dear tiny sweet infant Jesus that we have placed in golden fleece diapers to distract us from the real Jesus, the one who is the Son of the Most High God.

The story of the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary gives us a glimpse of the original Jesus, and *you can tell his authenticity by the presence of the brand names used that sacred night over 2000 years ago – Favored One, Emmanuel, Jesus, Son of the Most High, Servant of the Lord.* Five brand names identified by theologians as making the difference.

Let me explain, for unless you see these brand names, you might find yourself looking at a knockoff: The First name: *Favored One*. This is the name that Gabriel gives to Mary, when he says, “Greetings, favored one!” (Luke 1:28). Later, he comforts her by saying, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God (v. 30). What an amazing gift this is, to be favored by God — fully accepted and supported.

One of the giants of Christian history is Martin Luther, a one-time German monk who sparked the Protestant Reformation in the year 1517. For years, he was deeply troubled by his sin, and struggled with the questions, “How can I be accepted by God?” and “How can I find favor with God?” Luther’s breakthrough was the discovery that he was completely dependent on the mercy of God, and was saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

This insight ignited the Protestant Reformation, but in fact Luther’s discovery was a rediscovery. He unearthed what Mary already knew — that salvation is a gift of God, one that comes through faith not works. The same is true for us: We become the favored ones of God when we put our trust in Jesus, the genuine article.

Accept no substitutes.

The second name to look for is *Emmanuel*. Now it’s true that this particular name is not mentioned in this passage, as it is in Matthew, where we find, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). The promise of Emmanuel is a powerful promise, because it means that God is with us now and will be with us always — through stress and sickness, conflict and confusion, failure and frustration, despair and even death itself. Nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). That’s the guarantee of Emmanuel.

So where is this name in the story of the angel and Mary? If it doesn’t appear, are we dealing with a knockoff? No, look carefully — it’s kind of hidden. When Gabriel arrives, he says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (v. 28). The Lord is with you ... *God is with us*. The message to Mary — and to us — is that God is with us, in every time and place and situation.

That’s the Emmanuel brand.

Third, the angel Gabriel says, “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him *Jesus*” (v. 31, italics added). This name – Jesus - has a clear and specific meaning: “God saves.” There is nothing subtle about it. The name “Jesus” announces that God is working through the Son, to save us from sin and death.

He is an authentic Savior, this original Jesus. As the Christmas carol says, “Good Christian friends rejoice, with heart, and soul, and voice; Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!”

Born to save. That is *so* Jesus.

Fourth, Gabriel promises: “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” (v. 32, italics added). The Son of the Most High is not a powerless baby with tiny, fat, balled-up fists — he is the mature Son of God, with power and authority to rule like his ancestor King David. “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,” says Gabriel, “and of his kingdom there will be no end” (v. 33). Will Ferrell is right when he calls Jesus omnipotent — not powerless, but all-powerful.

Here is where some of the tension begins to show up...are we prepared to take orders from the Son of the Most High God? It’s easy to worship a baby who asks nothing of us but a diaper change. But are we willing to praise the King who gives the directive, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (6:27-28)?

Are we going to adore the ruler who says, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also” (v. 29)? Are we likely to bow gracefully to the one who commands, “Give to everyone who begs from you” (v. 30)?

No, it’s much easier to worship a powerless baby. But if we love our enemies, do good and lend without expectation of return, we will be acting as obedient servants of our powerful King. “Your reward will be great,” promises Jesus, “and you will be children of the Most High” (v. 35).

Obedience is going to be an expectation of an authentic Son of the Most High God.

Then, at the end of today’s passage, Mary asks how she can possibly become pregnant, since she is a virgin (1:34). Gabriel speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit and the surprising pregnancy of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, and he concludes with the words, “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37).

That’s right. Nothing ... will be impossible ... with God.

Mary takes a deep breath, then makes a stunning leap of faith, “Here am I, the *servant of the Lord*; let it be with me according to your word” (v. 38, italics added). Mary says “yes” to what God wants to do in her life, and this decision reveals that she is the “favored one” willing to put her complete trust in God. She calls herself the “servant of the Lord,” and in so doing becomes a model for the rest of us.

If we are going to follow an authentic Jesus, we each need to be a servant of the Lord. This means finding the Lord’s favor through faith, believing that God is always with us, trusting Jesus to save us and showing obedience to the Son of the Most High.

Serving God, as Mary did, begins with saying “yes” when we see the names Favored One, Emmanuel, Jesus, Son of the Most High. Serving God as Mary did, begins with saying yes—even when the Christmas Jesus grows up. Anything else is just a knockoff.

Sources:

- Anderson, Phil. “Luther still a force.” The Topeka Capital-Journal. October 28, 2006. <http://findarticles.com>.
- Wilson, Eric. “Before models can turn around, knockoffs fly.” The New York Times, September 4, 2007, A1. nytimes.com.
- Homiletics Winter 2008

Benediction

May you be strengthened by the good news that God proclaims in Jesus Christ. May you be drawn to the wonder of the mystery revealed, God’s eternal love for us made flesh in Jesus Christ. Go in the glory of God’s abundant love. Go with hope. Go in peace. Go with joy. Go in love. Thanks be to God.