

How Advent Came to Mary: Part One

We often miss the power of this season – of Christmas, or in the words of the church, Advent, which simply means “coming.” For hundreds of years Advent, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, which is this coming Sunday, has been a season of preparing for Jesus’ coming again to us – helping us to live our lives with renewed purpose and vision. This is the season when wise hearts call out through the increasing darkness of these days for Christ to once again be born in us.

This is the season to get in touch with what is going on in our hearts. It is a busy time. Our heads are filled with details to remember. It is also an emotionally complicated time. Our hearts are filled with thoughts of those we want to be with and those we struggle to be with. When we were children we longed for Christmas to come because it was a magical time of receiving gifts. But now what is it that we long for? What do we really want? What are the deepest desires of our hearts? What do we most want to do with our lives, with the time we have left to us? As the days grow darker this year, we pray that the light of these questions will penetrate our distractedness and guide us back to God, to Jesus being born again in us.

So we turn our attention to how the first Advent came. Our text is Luke 1:26-38. The story begins with the angel Gabriel appearing to a young teenage girl, still a virgin, in Nazareth, a village in the hill country of Galilee a bit off the beaten path. It was a smaller village than many suppose. Many lived in little more than grottos or caves in the hillsides. This girl was pledged to be married to a village craftsman named Joseph.

Her name was Mary. The angel greeting her called her “highly favored,” and assured her, “The Lord is with you.”

Mary wasn’t initially reassured; she was, in fact, “greatly troubled.” So the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked, “since I am a virgin?”

“The Holy Spirit,” Gabriel answered, “will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary’s response was, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

The virgin birth may be good news to us, but it wasn’t at first to Mary. She has to explain her pregnancy, and her explanation will be that she’s with child by the Holy Spirit! She faces scandal, shame, an unaccounted-for pregnancy, a marriage likely to be

called off, and women gossiping at the village well. There was something about this Mary, and it was not respectable. We can only try to imagine her panic, her anxiety, her sense of isolation, knowing that really no one can understand her.

So the angel says to her, “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid! Because that is always the issue. What stands between us and all that we could do is always fear. And the only way to get to the place to which God calls us is through the fear, straight through the fear.

Mary has been called. It’s the most extraordinary of all callings but life is archetypal, filled with recurring patterns. And Mary’s experience foreshadows our own. Her story is our story too. So you also have been called. You. We each have been called. It follows from even the very hairs of your head being numbered (Matthew 10:30). It follows from God loving each of his children, every son and every daughter. It follows from the fact that we have been born for something more than just to save our souls from Hell. We each have a life task, something that needs to be done that probably won’t happen unless we take responsibility for it.

But the first awareness we have of it will be fear. It can’t be done. Who am I to do it? It’s impossible. A lot of people won’t like it. I can’t do that to my husband or my wife or my children. We don’t have the money or the resources or the time or the talent. And fear will always haunt your calling. You will have to fight past disappointments and setbacks, past nay-sayers and critics, through long, long days and maybe sleepless nights. You will be tempted and distracted. Just when God calls you to door #1, Satan will show you doors #2 and 3. Your resolve, your seriousness as a person and as a disciple of Christ, will be tested again and again. There are dragons that have to be slain over and over and over. And we will fall down again and again, not occasionally, not once, not twice, but again and again. And again and again we will have to pull ourselves back up and return to our calling. We will have to say Yes to our calling again and again.

But if we give in the fear we will lose our way in life, we will lose our true callings. In our fear that we may lose our home, or our friends, or our health, that we may not have a job in six months or in two years, in our fear we will take our eyes off the prize, and we will make compromises we never intended to make. We will lose the gifts God has given us, and our voice will be silenced. Our lives will become pale shadows of what they might have been.

So the angel says not just to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” The story is archetypal. This is the one human story offered to everyone. The angel is saying also to us, “Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God.” Do not be afraid of ridicule, or being misunderstood, or being gossiped about at the village well. Do the right thing and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Do not be afraid of changing times or an uncertain future.

Do the right thing. God will see you through everything. Do not be afraid of being embarrassed. Embarrassments blow away in the wind.

Do the right thing. Do not be afraid of even disease and suffering and death. There is being born inside you the life of God, and it will last forever.

Part Two (of three) next week.

– Dale Pauls