

# A Mystery Beyond Imagining

## Readings

2 Sam 7:1-17

Ps 132:(1-7) 8-19

Rom 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

## Opening

Advent may well be my favorite season in the liturgical year, and the end of Advent, the final Sunday (today), . The Advent pilgrimage begins on a grand scale, guiding our attention to events such as the end of the world, the coming of Christ, the forceful message of the prophets. And when we come round the home stretch of Advent, we come home. The story gets smaller and smaller. The Advent story begins on a cosmic stage and concludes inside a humble Galilean home. We come to Nazareth by way of Jerusalem though. David desires to build a house *for* the Lord. The Archangel Gabriel greets Mary at her house in Nazareth. The house of David and the house of Mary are not only settings for the story—they *are* the story. Not two stories, but one story—a story that includes us in ways mysterious and tremendous.

## God Loveth Small Things

We begin with David. We see David here as a mighty successful king. He lives in a palace built with cedar, the finest and strongest of woods. He has had tremendous success defeating all enemies that oppose him and the God of Israel. Here is David at the height of his strength. He comes to Nathan the prophet, pours out his heart's desires honor the Lord

with a building project. David can't stand the thought that the ark of God still resides under a tent. The ark of God—containing the tablets which God gave Moses, Aaron's rod, a bowl for manna, the bread of heaven—this frame of wood was the sign of God's very real presence among his people. Without the ark, without God's very presence, no house could be a Temple.

So David seeks a divine building permit to construct a house for God. David won't break ground for this holy house without God's blessing. And that means speaking with Nathan the prophet. Nathan speaks to soon, signing off on the divine building permit. Then God comes to Nathan in a dream and Nathan has to bring David back to the beginning. Remember David. Remember when Samuel came to your father, Jesse, searching for Israel's king. You weren't in the original lineup. All your brothers stood before the prophet putting their manliest foot forward while you were tending sheep, David. You were the smallest and youngest of your brothers when God anointed you king, David.

I have great affection for a phrase E.F. Schumacher coined many years ago: "small is beautiful." The more I read the Bible as a single story, the more I see God's affection, his attention, even his election of small things. Israel is the least of the nations, Joseph the least of Jacob's sons, David the smallest of his brothers, Bethlehem the littlest city in Judaea. God does his finest work through small things. God loveth small things because the humble and weak are pliable in his hands. The humble soul is the best vessel for God's glory. When glory shines through small things, it's abundantly evident that the power belongs to God and not to his servants.

So God humbles David. It is not a moment of stern correction; rather, it's a return to humility. David had come saying, "I will build a house for the Lord." To which the Lord says, "No you won't. On the contrary, I will build a house *through* you."

How contrary are the ways of the Lord to our ways. Our thoughts are not his thoughts. We set goals and pursue them with all our effort and energy. We are an achievement society; our nation takes pride in what we can build—our cities, our technologies, our industries.

That cultural spirit makes its way into our souls. We bring our good desires, our very best desires to God, offering them to him as acts of service and worship. We focus so much attention on what we will do for God. Yet the greatest work of our lives is not a goal we

achieve or a work we accomplish: it is the work of God *within* us. It's really quite humbling. Yet it's the holiest work. It's the most powerful work God is doing.

## When a House Becomes a Living Temple

So God promises to build a house in David and through David. That's two houses if you're keeping count. There's a house that will come through David's body, a royal house, a succession of princes and kings. David's son, Solomon, will construct a Temple. He will send for wood from the King of Tyre to construct a house for God. That was God's will for Solomon—to build the physical house where the ark of God would rest. But God's will for David was a different house—the house that would be his sons and daughters.

The Lord will make a house for David, not David a house for the Lord. Solomon completed Temple construction in seven and a half years. The ark of the Lord's presence entered the Temple soon thereafter. But the Lord took much longer to complete the house of David.

When the Lord finally fulfilled the royal house of David, one thousand years after he declared this promise, he showed his affection again for that which was humble, small, and pure. He sent his Archangel Gabriel to the humble town of Nazareth in Galilee. Mary was as well-hidden in Nazareth as David was in the shepherd fields, only more so. In her lifetime, even good men would say of her hometown, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It betrays credulity to think a provincial virgin teenager would bear Israel's Messiah in her body.

Yet when Gabriel enters Mary's house, God's crowning work in the house of David will soon find its tremendous and wonderful fulfillment. The house of David will be complete when the Holy Spirit of God overshadows Mary with power. She, who was chosen for her humility, will be overshadowed by the same Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters, creating the cosmos from nothing. The Spirit of God that revealed his presence through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—this same Holy Spirit descends upon Mary's body. The Spirit that came to rest on the tabernacle and the ark of God's presence—this same Holy Spirit conceives the body of the eternal Son of God from Mary's own body.

All it takes is her obedience, her ‘yes’ for God to work through her. That is her life’s work—her obedience. Her total and complete ‘yes’ to the will of God, no matter how much or little she understands; no matter how much joy or sorrow that yes will bring. One definitive, eternal yes and the Holy Spirit will overshadow her, filling her humble meekness with divine glory. “Be it to me according to your word” the Virgin replied to Gabriel.

The Archangel of Lies, Satan, deceived the Mother of mankind, Eve, in her disobedience. But now Mary receives the word of God’s archangel, Gabriel, and proclaims her obedience. Where our ancient mother’s disobedience brought death, the Virgin Mother’s obedience conceived life and redemption for all who confess her son as Lord.

## Mary, Most Pure and Blessed

David’s great desire had been to build a permanent home for the ark of God. In the undefiled body of his greatest granddaughter, the Virgin Mary, the ark of God found its home. God was building a house for his very own Son through the line of David. As Andrew of Crete said, Mary’s body is:

the new ark of glory in which Spirit of God came down and rested. Ark, in which he who was holy in nature miraculously constructed for himself the sanctuary of new-found glory in the virginal workshop of nature, for the sake of his Incarnation; for he did not change in any way, but instead he added that which he was not since he was a lover of humankind<sup>1</sup>

How could David understand such a mystery? It is God’s great glory to not only exceed our expectations, but reveal wonders that we could not have imagined. His work *in* us and *through* us is always greater than the work we endeavor to do *for* him.

We honor Mary for her obedience; we bless the Lord for the mystery of his salvation. Mary’s body became the Temple of God *so that* a new generation could become bearers of God in

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<sup>1</sup>John Behr, ed., *Wider than Heaven: Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God*, trans. Mary B. Cunningham, vol. 35, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 207.

their bodies through faith in her Son God was not satisfied to dwell in a temple made with hands. He came to baptize our bodies so that we would be born anew by water and the mighty Holy Spirit; that we would be overshadowed with divine power in soul *and* body. That is why we call baptism ‘the womb of the Church.’ From the womb of the Church, newborn sons and daughters grow into a holy temple of the Lord—the temple whose house is our bodies.

*Andrewes and the Caroline Divines’ Teaching on the Blessed Virgin Mary*

Paper for the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, November, 2000.

It’s common that we come confused or anxious regarding our regard for Mary. Here is where our Anglican heritage helps us. One of our theologians from the 17th century, Mark Frank, offered this wise words regarding Mary:

by Dr. Marianne Dorman

*...Thee, for the most holy, pure, highly blessed, the Mother of God, Mary the eternal Virgin, with all the Saints.<sup>1</sup>*

So prayed Lancelot Andrewes in the Orthodox tradition frequently.

Give we her in God’s name the honour due to her. God hath styled her ‘blessed’ by the Angel, by Elizabeth, commanded all generations to call her so, and they witherto have done it, and let us do it too. Indeed, some of late have overdone it; yet let us not therefore underdo it, but do it as we hear the Angel and the first Christians did it; account of her and speak of her as the most blessed among women, one highly favoured, most highly too. But all the while give (the Lord) all the glory the whole glory of all to him; give her the honour and blessedness of the chief of the saints; - him only the glory that she is (honoured and blessed); and that by her conceiving and bringing our Saviour into the world we are made heirs, and shall one day be partakers of the blessedness she enjoys, when the Lord shall be with us too, and we need no angel at all to tell us so.

## Mary at Pentecost

In this sermon he also explained that by Mary’s obedience we have become brothers and sisters of Christ.

And here now at this word, ‘made of a woman,’ He beginneth to concern us somewhat. There draweth an alliance between us, for we also are made of a

In Luke’s sequel to his Gospel—the Book of Acts—the Blessed Virgin Mary appears with the 11 remaining disciples in the Upper Room, waiting for the Holy Spirit. This is the final

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*, eds. J. Bliss and J. P. Wilson, 11 vols (L.A.C.T., Oxford, 1841 – 54), afterwards referred to as Andrewes, Vol. 11, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53 - 4.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted from Marianne Dorman, Andrewes and the Caroline Divines’ Teaching on the Blessed Virgin Mary

occasion we find Mary in Scripture. They remained together until the Day of Pentecost had come. And then a mighty rushing wind blew through Jerusalem, filling the house where they praying. Sounds like an overshadowing of that whole place, that whole company of disciples.

How did the blessed mother of Jesus perceive that moment? Luke does not elaborate. But it doesn't take much sanctified imagination to see that her experience was unique among those waiting in the Upper Room.

She knew what happens when the Holy Spirit of the Most High God overshadows you with power. She knew the joy of obedience. The Spirit that overwhelmed her as a teenager in Nazareth now descended upon a new generation. Hers was a conception of the Son of God, theirs a baptism by the Holy Spirit. I imagine Mary experienced the scene like a mother whose joy was complete. The promise of a house, a temple, was greater than David imagined; it was greater than Mary imagined. Mary's yes not only made possible the Incarnation of God's holy Son, it prepared the way for Pentecost, for all sons and daughters to be overshadowed and baptized in the Holy Spirit. And when you are filled with that Holy Spirit, you receive a mystery that surpasses knowledge: God working in and through us always surpasses our greatest imagination.

So glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory to him from generation to generation and in Christ Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary, forever and ever. Amen.