

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Sunday, December 24, 2017

St. Luke 1:33, **“And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”**

Dear Christians,

Usually we have the Service of Lessons and Carols on the Fourth Sunday in Advent. But because Advent 4 falls on December 24 this year--today, we moved the Lessons and Carols to last Sunday. That's good because it allows us THIS Sunday to hear the Gospel account of Gabriel's visit to Mary—something we rarely have a chance to do. We call that visit the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she, although a virgin, would conceive and bear a son—Jesus.

I suppose every mother ponders what her child will be when he or she grows up. While they are still in the womb, every mother hopes and dreams that her son or daughter will be healthy, happy, successful, maybe even famous. As she gazes upon the ultrasound images of her little one, yet unborn, still being knit together in the womb, she hopes, that, at the very least, her child will do something of value, nothing flashy or headline-grabbing, but something that will help their neighbor and make life better for others, something that will ease the suffering and hardship that are all too commonplace in this fallen world.

Of course, sometimes parents dream big and hope for much. More often than not dreams, especially big dreams, don't come true. The reality of who our children are, what they accomplish, and the happiness and success they enjoy may be less than what we had hoped for them, maybe even less than what they had hoped for themselves.

Not so for Mary. Mary didn't have to muse about what her son would be when he grew up. She didn't have to dream that he would be healthy, happy, successful or famous. She didn't have to hope that He would do something of value, something that would help His neighbor and make life better for others, something that would ease the suffering and hardship that are commonplace in this fallen world.

No, the angel Gabriel took all the guess work out of it for Mary. The angel said to her, **“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”**

This young, unmarried virgin, could never have dreamed that she would bear a son of whom all these things would be true. She would never have hoped for such a son—because, frankly, it seemed impossible. The Son of the Most High God—HER son? The Son of David, the heir to David's throne, the everlasting King of God's people—HER son?

As Gabriel spoke, it became clear to Mary that her son was the long-hoped-for Christ that God had promised. It began to dawn on her that she was the woman spoken of in Genesis 3 whose seed would come and crush the head of Satan. Her son was the offspring of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. She was the virgin that Isaiah spoke of, the virgin who would conceive and bear a son who would be called Immanuel—God with us. Her son was the child that Isaiah said would sit on the throne of David, whose kingdom would be established and upheld forevermore and whose government would have no end.

Mary, at this point, didn't know that the kingdom Jesus would establish would be a kingdom of grace, a kingdom in which forgiveness of sins, salvation from death and the devil, and righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit would be the order of the day. Mary didn't know that Jesus would ascend to His everlasting throne only after being lifted high on a cross and laid low in the grave. Mary didn't know that in order to establish His kingdom of grace, Jesus must first humble Himself and assume as His own the sin and guilt and condemnation and death of every sinner.

And even as Mary knelt before the cross on Good Friday, witnessing her son's suffering and death for the sin of the world, it must have seemed to her that Jesus had come to an end. That His kingdom would not materialize. That His reign over the house of Jacob had ended before it even began. That the hopes and dreams of Israel would not be realized in Jesus.

But Jesus rose again from the dead. By His death and resurrection Jesus established His kingdom. The Son of the Most High has ascended on high having been given the name that is above every name. Forgiveness of sins has been accomplished. Death has been turned back and the devil defeated. Righteousness, peace, and joy are the gifts His Spirit freely gives to all who trust in Him.

St. Paul writes in Romans 6, **“We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him.”** Jesus, the King, now lives forever. And because Jesus, the King, lives forever, His reign of grace and mercy will continue forever. Because Jesus, the King, lives forever, His kingdom will have no end.

Your sinful conception and birth didn't give your parents much to dream about or to hope for in regard to you. No matter how happy or healthy or successful or famous or influential or affluent you may or may not be, your sin-laced conception and birth destined you to a life of disobedience that made you displeasing to God. Your sinful nature charted a course for you that lead only and inevitably to death, damnation, and destruction.

But Mary's sinless son was conceived and born for YOU. Mary's son was destined to be YOUR king. The kingdom of grace He has established is a kingdom intended for every sinner—including YOU, no matter how far beyond redemption you think you are. The death He died was YOUR death. The forgiveness He accomplished

is the forgiveness of YOUR sins. The salvation from death and the devil that He won is His free gift to YOU again this Christmas. Righteousness, peace and joy are but a few of the gifts that the Holy Spirit has waiting for YOU under the tree of the cross.

Through the Gospel, Jesus calls out to you again today, **“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”** Jesus says, **“Unless you are born again of the water and the Spirit you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”** The flipside of that coin is that all who are born again of the water and the Spirit have entered the kingdom of God. Paul writes to the Colossians, **“He has transferred us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption—the forgiveness of sins.**

You who believe and are baptized are members of that kingdom right now. Jesus is your benevolent King. You have come under His kingly reign and under the sway of His grace and mercy. God’s kingdom has come to you. God has given you His Holy Spirit. By His grace you believe God’s holy Word and you trust in Jesus, the Word made flesh. By His grace you now lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

To be sure we live in a world where nothing lasts forever, including the kingdoms of this world. We live in the greatest country on the face of the earth, the wealthiest and most powerful nation the world has ever known. And sometimes we think that we Americans are untouchable. That our nation will simply continue. But not even the United States of America will exist forever. You will not be an American forever.

But you are a member of God’s kingdom. Jesus, your King, lives forever. His reign of grace endures forever. His kingdom will never end. And because Jesus lives forever, YOU will live forever. Because His reign of grace endures forever, YOU can be sure of His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Because God’s kingdom never ends, YOU who are members of His kingdom will never end.

One day, either when you die or when Jesus comes again, you will transition from God’s kingdom of grace to God’s kingdom of glory. You will dwell in that place where you will experience and enjoy what neither you or your parents could have ever dreamed of or hoped for. Life that never ends. Perfect peace with God and perfect love for one another. A new heavens and a new earth in which you will enjoy, without interruption, God’s very good creation. A body that will not grow old or get sick or die. And all because of Jesus, the Son of the Most High and Mary’s son, our Savior and our King. Merry Christmas!

In Jesus’ name
Amen