



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 19, 2021
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Luke 1:39-55
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Each Rejoices on Account of What Lies Hidden in the Other

Gaudet utraque quia latet uterque.

At Saint Philip's in the Hills, the church I served before coming to Saint Thomas, there's a small side chapel, dedicated to Saint Benedict, that was formerly the baptistery.

It's an eight-sided space, the number eight having baptismal significance (the font here is also eight-sided):

it represents the eighth day of creation, the dawning day of redemption and renewal, the new heaven and the new earth coming-to-be.

One of the sides of this room is the door, opposite which, on the other side, is the altar.

And on the other six walls, is a series of fifteenth century carved marble reliefs depicting images associated with the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Underneath each one is a short Latin inscription that comments on the scene depicted. They're extraordinary pithy encapsulations of high mystical theology.

For instance:

the inscription underneath the Annunciation paraphrases Saint Athanasius:

Deus fiat homo ut homo fiat deus.

God becomes human, so that humans can become God.

The scene depicting the Visitation, which we just heard from our Gospel sees the youthful Mary and the elderly but startlingly pregnant Elizabeth rushing toward each other, to tenderly embrace one other.

And the inscription reads: *Gaudet utraque quia latet uterque.*

A literal translation leaves something to be desired, but the idiomatic sense of it is: each rejoices on account of what lies hidden in the other.

There's something profound there, I think, that speaks to our common Christian vocation, that serves as an invitation to us, that asks us:

what would it be like, how would we, our communities, our world be transformed

if we could manage to rejoice on account of what lies hidden in each other;

if we could manage to stand in rapt ecstatic wonder

At the Mystery of Grace unfolding in each others' lives?

The Magnificat—our Lady's hymn on the unexpected, wild, and majestically awesome

Mystery of Grace unfolding through her and in the world—
lays out the vision of such a transformation, what such a transformation looks like.
And I think Mary's able to sing this vision, share this vision,
And Elizabeth is able to receive and rejoice in this vision with Mary
Because of their attention to the Mystery at work in themselves and in each other.

II

Now. We can talk about the Image of God that is in us
in which image we were made, for the sake of which image we were and are formed.
We can talk about how this image lays hidden in each of us: how the way of sin and death
the way of self against other, us against them, the way of hatred and violence
obscures this image, conceals it, muffles the light of it, and blinds us to it.
And we can talk, too, about how that image nonetheless persists in us.
How it continually calls us back to ourselves, back to God.
And how God beheld this image in us, and rejoiced at it
and desired to reveal it fully in and through Jesus Christ,
the infinite fullness of God's glory in a human life,
the first in a new creation, a remaking of the world,
in which the Image may be hidden in us no more
but revealed as a splendid brightness of mercy and of grace.
And we can talk about how when this glory,
the perfection of the image in which we were made
was revealed to us, we sought to destroy it:
so given were we to death, we sought to destroy the life in us
by crucifying the very Life of the World.
And we can talk about how this Life, this Glory, took our violence and death-centeredness
exhausted it and undid it and returned to us more vibrant and alive with deathless Love
than we could have ever possibly imagined anyone being alive with anything,
and invited us to share that life, to receive that life,
so that we could not only have the image of God in us renewed,
but be *like* that image, with that image alive in us and being the life within us,
as we become, by grace, what God is by nature (to paraphrase Maximos the Confessor).
we can talk about all of that—and what we're talking about when we do, Beloved,
is what it means to be a God-bearer: to bear God to the world in our human lives
By the Mystery of Grace.

III

You may have heard before Meister Eckhart's startling words on the Incarnation,
but they're worth repeating.
If you don't know him, Eckhart was a 14th century Dominican monk
and one of the most controversial mystical theologians of his day.
On the Incarnation, Eckhart writes:
"What good would it do me for Mary to be full of grace if I were not also full of grace?
And what would it profit me that the Father gives birth to His Son unless I bear Him too?"
(Sermon 88, trans Maurice O'C Walshe)
"What does it avail me that this birth is always happening if it does not happen in me?
That it should happen in me is what matters."
(Sermon 1, trans Maurice O'C Walshe)
Mary was called to be the Theotokos, the Bearer of God, the Mother of God.
So are you.
The unfolding Mystery of Grace through Jesus Christ
cannot be a reality that lives abstractly outside of us and not within us.

No: we are all meant to be Theotokoi, we are all meant to be Bearers of God, Mothers of God.
Your heart, your mind, your soul, your body
The fullness of your being
is meant to be a site of the inbreaking grace and presence of God in this world,
the God of Love who knew you and loved you before ever time and space were made
and rooted his very image in the depths of you.
What a fantastically magnificent, gob-smackingly glorious thing:
that a seemingly small human life,
a life like mine, or yours, or your neighbor's
can be a window onto the life of God.
"Though thou be little," says the prophet, "...yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me
...[One] whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."
How utterly astounding that a little human life
can be full of a Mystery of Grace,
the shape of which would be a marvel to behold and rejoice us to no end
if we could pay attention to it.

So. How to pay attention? Particularly in a world filled with distraction.
Mary tells us in the Magnificat
Our Lady says: God's "mercy is on them that fear him."

IV

Now. Fear.
We don't like to think about God necessarily as one to be feared,
particularly when we're told that perfect love casts out fear,
which is completely true.
So it doesn't seem to make sense, this fearing God business.
But I think our misgivings here are because we misunderstand fear. Holy fear.
It's not merely a feeling,
not just an apprehension of the Perfectly Loving Majesty of the Sovereign Lord of the Universe.
Not just the dizzying realization that the Glory of that Majesty must look to us like the Cross
No, the fear of the Lord must be a disposition of life, not merely a fleeting feeling.
And I think that if we regard the Blessed Virgin Mary to discover
what that disposition of life might actually look like,
I think we'll see that it means this:
an unwavering willingness to be overshadowed by God.
An unwavering willingness to be overwhelmed by God;
by the terribly awesome Glory and gratuitously wondrous Majesty of God.
That disposition of life, I think, is the fear of the Lord.
It's a way of saying, "Yes. Let it be to me according to your word."
Yes to the unknown and unknowable Mercies
of the transcendentally Merciful One.
A way of stepping, by grace, into the incalculable regard of the Light Inaccessible
a way by which that Light is kindled in us
by which the image of God is revealed in us
and we are made bearers of God accomplishing the vision of his grace:
casting down the proudly powerful,
standing with the outcast and rejected,
giving food to the hungry,
naming the emptiness of wealth,
overturning the way of death that is the way of the world,
and revealing another way of life and love:

a way that enables us to celebrate and nurture in each other
the unfolding wonder of the Mystery of Grace.
This disposition to be overwhelmed is a fearful way
because it looks, in its vulnerability to grace,
in its orientation to the good of others,
like the undoing of the death-bound world to which we have grown so accustomed:
it looks like crisis or brokenness,
even as it meets the ongoing crises of the world with the fullness of God's own Love.
It's a fearful way because it's a way of Unknowing,
the way of the Overwhelming Superluminous Darkness of God
that is so bright we have to close our eyes of understanding to it
so that we can be led by grace through faith to the highest understanding that is Love.
And yet it's also a way of radiant joy, of ecstatic wonder.
"His mercy is on them that fear him."
Those who are willing to be overwhelmed by,
filled by,
undone by,
healed by,
transformed by,
love,
can rejoice in that Love wherever it's found, and be bearers of that Love to the world.

V

In a handful of days, it will be Christmas.
We'll make our way to the manger to celebrate the birth of Jesus,
the coming of God into our midst
the sharing of God in our human lives:
the Word of God Incarnate.
But how will God be born in you?
How will you sing the Mystery of Grace unfolding in you?
How will you be overwhelmed by God?
How will you stand before your neighbor and marvel at the Mystery unfolding in them?
How will your soul magnify the Lord and live the Magnificat's vision of grace?
How will we, this community, become a community of God-bearers
that rejoices on account of what lies hidden in each?

To Jesus Christ, the Root of Jesse, the Hidden Mystery revealed by the Spirit: to him be all honor, power
and glory with the Father in the Unity of the same Spirit, world without end, Amen.