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The Fourth Sunday in Advent **December 19, 2021**

When the Lord Comes Near **His Mission Is Revealed**

The Advent Season prepares us for the coming of Christ: his coming at Christmas, his coming in Word and sacrament, and his coming at the end of time. On this day our thoughts turn specifically to Christmas. We ask with the poet: What child is this? His mother Mary provides a response in her beautiful song, Magnificat. She rejoices in the birth of God her Savior. Jesus came to our world to save!

Sermon **Hebrews 10:5-10**

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

**“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.
Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God.’ ”**

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”—though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

You can't ask a man what it's like to be pregnant. He can tell you what his wife tells him about being pregnant, but that's not the same. So I can't tell you what Mary was thinking or feeling those first weeks after Gabriel's visit. It seems like she needed to talk. The Bible never mentions her mom or an actual sister, but the Gospel for today tells us that she went to see Elizabeth. Seems to have been an obvious choice. Elizabeth was an older relative, probably a confidant, and the news was that Elizabeth was pregnant, too. So Mary headed south a hundred miles to spend time with Elizabeth. Was she more tired than usual? Did she have morning sickness? Feel a heartbeat? Was she showing? We don't know. We do know this: This baby inside her was her baby, but he was also God's baby, God's Son. So we can be pretty sure that this baby was the center of Mary's world.

Right now, this baby is the center of our world, too. We're six days from Christmas and Christmas is about a baby. Page through the Christmas hymns in the hymnal, new one or old one. The baby is everywhere. Look at the manger scenes in churches; the baby is always in the middle. You come to church on Christmas Eve and the focus is on a baby lying in a manger. This is the way it needs to be. We need to remember who the Baby Jesus is. From the instant of his conception in Mary's womb this baby was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. And from exactly the same instant he was also truly and fully human. On Christmas Day St. John

will remind us that **the divine Word became flesh**—incarnate: in the flesh—and **made his dwelling among us**. And that's why this baby is the center of Christmas.

So Mary went to see Elizabeth and sang a song about her baby. We call it the *Magnificat*, a word that means to magnify or to glorify. Mary sang, **My soul glorifies the Lord**. But she didn't stop there; she kept singing, **and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior**. To Mary, there was more here than a pregnancy, more than a birth, more than a baby. Mary understood that the incarnation would move on. It wouldn't end in Bethlehem. In her body Mary felt a baby; with her faith Mary saw a Savior. And that's why this baby was the center of her world. And that's why this baby is also the center of our faith.

There are plenty of Christmas songs besides the Magnificat and we all enjoy singing along, especially the old favorites. But here's an encouragement we need to hear:

Sing Your Christmas Carols at the Cross

The Second Reading for today is from the Letter to the Hebrews in chapter 10. We're not exactly sure who wrote this letter, but he must have been an important follower of Jesus and he must have known the Old Testament worship practices as well as anybody. Whoever he was, he was writing to Hebrew Christians, Jewish people who had come to believe in Jesus. The problem was that these Hebrews were slipping back into old customs. So the author reviews all the old worship practices—the sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood—and he identifies them as **shadows of the good things that were coming**. The sacrifices reminded the people of their sins, he wrote, but **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins**. And then he put the words of David in Psalm 40 into the mouth of Christ: **When Christ came into the world, he said**—here's quotation--**Sacrifices and burnt offerings you did not desire**. The psalm repeats the thought in a different way: **With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased**. When he explained what Christ meant by this, the author repeated the words again: **Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them—though they were offered in accordance with the law**. OK. So he made the point because he really wanted to make the point. Whether you're an Old Testament believer or a New Testament believer, obeying God's law never solves the problem of sin. Obedience can't earn you forgiveness. Neither animal sacrifices nor personal sacrifices ever get rid of hell.

So what would get rid of sin and hell? Christ speaking through David again: **A body you prepared for me**. So here's the baby Jesus! The Son of God who was in the beginning, who was with God, who was God, this divine being wrapped himself in a human body: First a fertilized egg, then an embryo, then blood and veins and bones and skin. Then emotions and intelligence, then the sense of pleasure, pain. This is the baby born in Bethlehem. This is the incarnation: God took on flesh and blood. God became a baby. And his parents named him Jesus.

But he didn't stay a baby or a boy or teenager. **Then I said**—Christ speaking again—**Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll**. The Old Testament scrolls were filled with promises that a Messiah and a Savior and a Redeemer would come from God. This body named Jesus was God's choice. **Then I said, I have come to do your will, my God**. The writer repeats this to make the point: **Then he said, Here I am. I have come to do your will**.

What is God's will? What does God want? We know this. God wants to save the world from sin. God wants to undo the evil of Eden. God wants to open the dungeon of the devil. The Son of God took on a body to do what God willed and wanted. With a body, Jesus was obligated to obey God's law perfectly, just as we are. Unlike this body and these bodies, Jesus did not inherit sin or commit sin. And so his perfect body took the place of our imperfect bodies under the law. With a body Jesus was obligated to be punished for sin, just as we are. But with his perfect body he was able to be punished innocently, and so his death could stand in for the death we had coming. God wants all people to be saved. Jesus did what God wanted; he carried out God's will: And so his incarnation led to his crucifixion. And now the writer concludes: **And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**.

This body came for each of you sitting in these pews. This body for each child, each grandchild, each neighbor, each friend. This body in place of all bodies everywhere on the globe. Holy? I'm holy? Really? Really! Your sins cleansed, your

slate clean, your guilt abolished, your condemnation dismissed, the devil defeated, and his hell destroyed. Holy? I'm holy? Really? Really! Your prayers heard, your sadness lifted, your sickness explained, your lives empowered, your future secure, your heaven guaranteed. And all because the Son of God became a baby in a body. And now you know why Mary sang: **My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.** Mary had a baby: my Lord!

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, she didn't know the details. She couldn't have foreseen the shepherds at the stable or the gifts of the magi. She wouldn't have anticipated the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 or the wedding at Cana where she asked him to help a groom when he ran out of wine. She probably wondered what old Simeon meant when he told her that **a sword would pierce her soul**. She couldn't have imagined a crucifixion; she couldn't have handled the thought of seeing her baby die. But she certainly saw the victory. And so Mary sang with a mother's heart, but she also sang with a believer's heart. **His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.** The baby she was carrying would be the central figure of history and what he would do would be the turning of history. Nothing would ever be the same. And it all happened, not just with a baby's cry in a manger but with the Savior's cry from the cross: **It is finished.**

And that's why we sing our Christmas carols at the cross. The crucifixion comes along with the incarnation. The Son of God took on a human body to become the Savior of the world. And so, he took away your sins, too. The man who wrote to the Hebrews had to remind them of this. And he needs to remind us, too. So when we sing sweet songs like Away in a Manger or Silent Night or O Little Town of Bethlehem, we must see the whole story. We must look beyond the ox and the ass and the swaddling clothes; we must see the cross and the nails and crown of thorns. We must see the life he lived for us and the death he died for us. And then we will see what Mary is seeing now: Her son as the risen and reigning Savior who hears her sing with all the saints and angels of heaven. And those songs sound forever.

Softly from his lowly manger
Jesus calls one and all,
You are safe from danger.
Children, from the sins that grieve you
You are freed; all you need
I will surely give you.

Come, then, banish all your sadness!
One and all, great and small,
Come with songs of gladness.
We will live with him forever
There on high in that joy
Which will vanish never. Amen.