

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 15, 2008

Already we are looking the Advent IV lessons, the readings for Sunday, December 21, 2008. John the Baptist slides off the Advent stage in favor of a possibly more welcome figure, Mary.

II Samuel 7: 1 - 11, 16

This is really a great text, at least for those who favor a theo-centric witness. On a superficial level, it is the promise of a Davidic line, which prepares for the fulfillment, if in an unexpected way, in the birth of Jesus. Luke 1: 32, "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." At a deeper level it is a dialogue between God and man, the latter being represented by prophet Nathan and king David. David, now settled and triumphant as king, thinks to build God a house; Nathan gives the "all clear." But then Nathan hears from God, who is not pleased. God, not David, will "build the house," (Ps. 127). God is the subject of the verbs here, not the object of which David or any other human being is the subject. My friend Fleming Rutledge advises preachers to watch the subjects of their verbs. Is it you, or us humans, or is it God who is the subject of your verbs? Make it, at least more often, God. On a recent visit to Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, parishioners told me that their minister had distilled the message of the entire Bible to six words. "Oh really," I said, "and what might those be?" "I am God and you're not!," they answered with laughter. Pretty much what the message of this text is as well.

Romans 16: 25 - 27

And, as if to add an exclamation point to the above narrative, we have Paul with a closing benediction to the Romans, "to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen." It's all about God. Note the conjunction of two words in vs. 25, "strengthen" and "proclamation." Proclamation is the announcement of what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ, the anointed and appointed one. It is by proclaiming the truth about God and about what God has done and is doing for our salvation that the church is "strengthened." Again, God is the subject of the verbs. Our part? "The obedience of faith," (vs. 26). That in itself is a provocative turn of phrase as the obedience of faith is not blind but bold obedience, not marching in lockstep or goosetstep, but setting out, with Abraham and all the faithful, to "a land I will show you." Now to Mary, who embodies the "obedience of faith."

Luke 1: 26 - 38

Finally, something that sounds like, is related to the Nativity story--the "annunciation to Mary." This is Gabriel's second appearance in Luke. Earlier he had come to the ancient priest, Zechariah, to announce that God had heard his prayers and he and his wife, Elizabeth, though she was barren would conceive and bear a son, John the Baptist. After opening a barren womb for a couple well beyond the time for having children, what's left? How about, I know, a virgin birth! In concert with the opening reading, we are reminded that Mary was engaged to Joseph "of the house of David." Of course, sticklers might wonder what the point

of that is, given that Joseph is not exactly the father. How about a paternity test? Picky, picky, picky! The point, as with II Samuel and Romans, is that this is God's doing. God is interceding, breaking in, making a new thing to happen at the intersection of time and eternity. After the recitation of titles and promises associated with Jesus in verses 32 - 33, doesn't it seem a little humorous, in a way, that Mary says, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" as in "hold on, just a darn minute!" Mary, becomes the first disciple, giving assent to this call of God, this summons to leave all else behind and follow Christ. She embodies the risky "obedience of faith" of which Paul spoke. So as Advent concludes and Christmas looms, the focus is God's surprises, God's resolve, God's faithfulness.