

Hospitality of the heart  
in an inhospitable world:

## The Art and Craft of Accommodation, or Standing Firm

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A Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent Season

### Appointed text, for context:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Luke 1:39-56

### **PREFACE:**

Let's summarize where we have come in our Advent journey this season, as a set-up for tonight's comments. Looking back:

The First Sunday in the Advent season I reflected on the bidding prayer to "put on the armor of light ..." I spoke of being "Castaways in light armor: Humility in the face of our mortality"

I suggested facing the hard truth of the matter. Exposing the works of darkness to the light of day does not, in fact, vanquish the darkness; just as merely pointing out what is ultimately true does not necessarily make what is true prevail. Ignorance and brutality are blind and belligerent for a reason; and that reason just may not be because the lost and wayward have not yet "seen the light." In the pragmatic world in which we live, light armor can't hold a candle against the works of darkness.

Yet we are also shown how to undertake such a losing proposition, as imitators of the one who "came to visit us in great humility." Our God is a humble God, expressed in what Buechner once called the "magnificent defeat" of God: In this way, one might not only "cast off" works of darkness, but simple pretense as well; lack of pretense is a genuine form of humility.

The Second Sunday of Advent Season was about "unfavorable odds," found in the *powerlessness* of prophets, compared with the "principalities and powers" of this world. I spoke about the message of prophets, who are willing to tell us -- at the risk of our displeasure -- some inconvenient truths about ourselves. And about a God who seems to have the a penchant for defying appropriate earthly authorities; in order to -- time and again -- leave the most important things in the hands of the last and least among us. This includes prophets from beyond the fringe, and again -- in the case of this evening's gospel story -- a pregnant, virgin, peasant girl.

Conventional wisdom tells us, only important people are to be entrusted with the most important matters. Why? Because those in positions of power usually win; particularly when the game is played on their turf, and they make all the rules. Betting on wilderness prophets -- and the message they risk everything to bring us -- the odds are clearly stacked against you. There'd be little reason to go with such unfavorable odds, if it weren't the message. The message is about the Word of God that comes to us out of wilderness; to dwell amongst us, if we only have the *powerlessness* to receive him.

The Third Sunday of Advent Season was about exceeding all expectations of what gifts I might

give and receive this year, and about the “costliest Christmas.”

I calculated that the cost of showering my beloved with pricey gifts – one each for the traditional twelve days of Christmas -- putting me back over \$87,000; but that would still pale in comparison to something anyone can give that costs nothing, but everything.

Then I considered John the Baptist’s announcement; one that might sound like divine retribution – about the viper’s brood and a winnowing fork of judgment; but is instead more a message of redistribution in these recessionary times; when what will come, with “fire and Spirit,” is a winnowing fork. A winnowing fork: the means by which all that is valuable and worthwhile might be separated from all the chaff, the clutter and the crap. Then the costliest Christmas everyone can afford can be where we give of our true selves.

This evening’s homily continues to draw on many of these ideas now, as we reflect on the “handmaiden of God,” the art and craft of accommodation, and knowing when to stand firm.

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In November, there was a furious dust-up in American conservative circles when Pres Obama took a deep bow before Japan’s Emperor Akihito. The criticism accused our Commander in Chief of groveling to a foreign leader. To add further insult, it was this emperor’s father who’d ruled Japan in 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

While apparently intended as a gesture of respect on the part of the President, what was interpreted by his critics was a form of weakness; and, in turn, a denigration of America’s position of power and dominance in the world. As leader of the free world, so the argument went, the U.S. should not subordinate itself to any other foreign leader or nation.

A month later, Obama was in Oslo, accepting the Nobel Peace prize. He readily acknowledged both his lack of accomplishment thus far in the peace-making arena; and the seeming irony of having just announced his decision to escalate U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

NY Times columnist, David Brooks, wrote an astute editorial, pointing out the carefully crafted reasoning of the President’s thinking in the acceptance speech he delivered in Oslo. Brooks observed that Obama had seemed to

have embraced the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century notion advanced by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, known as “Christian realism,” which goes a little like this:

Each person is part angel, part devil. Life is a struggle to push back against the evils of the world without succumbing to the passions of the beast lurking inside oneself. So as you act to combat evil, you don’t want to get carried away by your own righteousness, or be seduced by the belief that you are innocent. Even fighting evil can be corrupting.

The columnist went on to quote part of a 2007 speech, in which Obama reflected Niebuhr’s thinking: “I take away the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.”

Then, as recently as Obama’s speeches at West Point and in Oslo, the President talked about the “core struggle of human nature” between love and evil, and the high ideals of the human rights. He talked about America’s “strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct.” He talked about the need to balance the moral obligation to champion freedom, while not getting swept up in self-destructive fervor. Most of all, Brooks noted, this powerful man talked about the paradox at the core of cold war liberalism, of the need to balance “two seemingly irreconcilable truths” — that war is both folly and necessary.”

These two incidents, separated by only a wrinkle in time – Obama’s self-denigrating bow, then his muscle-flexing -- illustrates the art and craft of accommodation on the one hand; and an arbitrary determination when to draw a line in the sand and stand firm, on the other.

Now, where it clearly appears the difficult task and challenge for important figures of human history to hone such skills, what about persons of much more modest means in the humblest of circumstances; for those who – by all outward appearances – have little influence to shape the world around them, and little to lose in their powerless lot in life?

I thought about these two news stories this Advent season, in the context of our waiting expectation and preparation, considering how Christ might come into this world and into our lives in a new way; that Christmas might be more than simply the reenactment of all our old cherished traditions that are once again hauled out, set up for a time, then taken down again,

packed up and tucked out of sight. And, in doing so, this duality and tension between accommodation and standing firm brought me around to thinking about Mary.

The Virgin Mary, “handmaiden of God,” that human vessel by which God presumably and decisively entered into the affairs of human history; without the taint of human sin and the defilement by which you and I came into this world in our messy, swaddling clothes. That is one traditional view of Mary, her role and function. In such a portrayal, her significance – and therefore her credibility -- hinges on the biological conundrum of an immaculate conception.

To be honest, the whole idea of a virgin birth has never been all that impressive, nor persuasive, to my way of thinking. First of all, any human parent that has ever participated in the act of co-creation has inescapably found themselves bound up in an experience that is sufficiently miraculous. Furthermore, it seems to me one can accept the deeper message behind the myth; just as when God creates human form to begin with, out of nothing more than a lump of clay and Spirit.

But moreover, the mytho-poetic tale of a human/divine union is not only a religious doctrine that is hardly unique to Christianity; it is an unnecessary distraction. It’s a red herring. The importance of Miryam giving birth to a son she names Jeshua (in the original Aramaic) has less to do with her maidenhood, and more to do with her message. It has to do with who she is, and the song she sings.

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The first thing to appreciate about Miryam is who she is, her personhood. She was a real, live human being; set in a certain time and place in human history. That simple fact gets lost to a beatific persona that too often places her in a pure and privileged class, it seems to me; somewhere above the archangels, cherubim and seraphim, slightly below the right hand of God Almighty. If you can’t get through to the Father through the Son, a whole prayer tradition suggests, maybe the BVM can intercede on your behalf. The risk is making her out to be someone other than who she is.

Trying to imagine Maryam is a little like the little controversy I read recently about the branding makeover that’s been given to the Sunmaid Raisin girl. Remember what she used to look like on the boxes we’d find packed in our school lunches? The news report ran as follows:

“Sun-Maid recently decided to join Betty Crocker, Aunt Jemima and Mrs. Butterworth’s in giving the female face of their product a substantial makeover from a young, early 20th-century girl into a buxom, modern young woman, leading some to say that the newly made-over raisin girl looks like a Barbie Doll in Amish attire. ... The new computer-animated version of the Sun-Maid girl currently featured in television advertisements is a departure from the classic design.”

Fact is, according to the company’s website, the Sun-Maid maiden was a real young woman, named Lorraine Collett Petersen. She was discovered in 1915, while drying her black hair curls in the sunny backyard of her parents’ home in Fresno, California. She was then asked to pose for a watercolor painting, while holding a basket of grapes while wearing a sunbonnet. The practice is not unique. The French government recently went so far as to propose restricting their fashion industry from computer-enhanced alterations in model’s photos; where impossible and unrealistic emaciated ideals were promulgated. That’s advertising for you, one might say. But when it comes to Mary, who had no pretense of posing otherwise, perhaps we shouldn’t think of her as anything or anyone other than who, in fact, she was.

Closer to home, I think of an entire generation of young girls who, year after year, vied to play the part of Mary in the parish Christmas pageant. Year after year at the holidays Kathy worked two jobs; dashing between her backstage work at the SF Ballet’s Nutcracker performances, then gathering together the parish children and their costumes; casting donkeys and sheep, shepherds, king, Joseph and Mary. God bless her!

The biggest question each year was whether we’d have a real live baby, born close enough to time of the performance; then borrowed from the parish breeding stock for a few minutes during the gradual hymn and the reading of the gospel nativity narrative on Christmas Eve.

Some years were barren, and a real virgin playing the part of Mary ended up with a towel, rolled up inside a towel, wrapped in a swaddling cloth.

Other years a young nervous mother would sit in the front pew, and reluctantly accommodate us for a few minutes, placing her little miracle in the cradling arms of a pre-pubescent girl. After all, how could you pass up the chance to let your young prodigy portray the Son of God.

But again, the importance of Miryam has less to do with her maidenhood, and more to do with her message. There is this far more radical view of this character that the gospel writer would have us see; if we would only draw back the veil of purity rites and sweet sentimentality.

Robert Cromey, an old colleague, retired Episcopal priest, social activist and proud thorn in the side of ecclesiastical authority, recently wrote in his blog:

What is the oldest Christmas Carol? It's not *Silent Night*, written in 1792; nor *Adeste Fidelis*, written in 1711; nor even *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, dated 348 C.E. No, the oldest Christmas carol was written 2000 years ago by a powerless, penniless, illiterate Jewish pregnant peasant girl. Her song is the *Magnificat*.

Indeed, the *Magnificat*, sung by Mary as the culmination of our Advent preparation for the Word to become living flesh is a subversive manifesto that would become the message of her itinerant rabbi son, and (presumably) the gospel of Christian faith and practice.

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She begins her song gently praising God for the great things God has done; and with genuine humility, giving thanks to God for the unlikelihood of her being chosen. But then the pitch rises, as her lungs fill and her emboldened voice speaks in such a way that it should have rattled the halls of power.

Lifting up the lowly, she proclaims, God does great things. The proud are "scattered," along with the "imagination" – the secrets -- of their hearts. Those who rule from lofty places are humbled, and those who once had it all learn what it is to have nothing. What's more, that impoverishment might be their salvation.

As Luke spins the tale, Mary and Joseph will next travel to Bethlehem because the empire has decreed a census shall be undertaken. I

don't know if her gynecologist instructed her not to travel, but the empire accommodates no one. When she goes into labor they resort to a cave or a cow stable, or some such inhospitable place; because there were no accommodations available at the local inn. It is an inhospitable world out there.

No matter. Mary has already mastered the art and craft of accommodation. She will soon flee to Egypt for a time with her newborn. She will return sometime later, so her son Jeshua might become an itinerant rabbi for a few years. He'll play a cat and mouse game with the ecclesiastical authorities and political powers for a brief while, then lose. And Mary will find herself standing firm at the foot of the cross, that losing proposition and magnificent defeat.

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In a way, the whole tale begins with Maryam and her song; when she relents and relinquishes herself to the Spirit. It is a Spirit that not only blesses her own willing accommodation; but -- of even greater significance -- gives her voice to stand firm against the transitory powers of this world, with a song and a message.

It is the message of accommodation and conviction we find expressed in the words of the two old Advent prayers that began and end our journey. That our God will come to "visit us in great humility," and "dwell among us." If, and when, he might "find in us a mansion prepared for him."