

Advent 4C (12/20/09 – *When the Word Comes to You*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

When the Word Comes to You ... things start happening! Big things ... and little. Great things ... and maybe some things you'd rather not have happen. Noticeable things ... and things you yourself may not even notice at first ... if at all – let alone those around you. But you can be sure of this: *When the Word Comes to You* ... things **will** happen.

When the Word Comes to Mary – through the message of God's angel, Gabriel – things happen ... **big** things! *Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! ... behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS ... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* [LK 1.28, 31, 35] That is the Word of the Lord to Mary. And there she is – the one and only pregnant Virgin ... the Mother of God Incarnate. That's big! Really big! And great! Unnoticeable at first ... but later it could not go **unnoticed** – by Mary ... by Mary's family ... by her betrothed husband, Joseph ... indeed, by the world!

But the Word that came to Mary didn't stop there. *And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.* [LK 1.36] Old, barren Elizabeth is no longer barren – she's six months pregnant! Of course, that Word had already come to Elizabeth – by Zechariah – through the angel sent to Zechariah as he was serving in the Temple. *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord ... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”* [LK 1.13-17] She *who was called barren* conceives nothing less than the greatest Old Testament Prophet and Forerunner of the long-awaited Savior. That's big ... great!

When the Word Comes to Elizabeth a second time – through Mary’s greeting – the baby in her womb leaps for joy and Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit [1.41]. And she gives voice to the eternal reality of those whom God has created and sustains a living faith. By faith she recognizes her own unworthiness to be in the presence of God – even if He is doubly-veiled in human flesh ... since He comes to her in Infant flesh while yet in the womb of the Virgin Mary. ***Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?***, says Elizabeth in the humility of repentant faith [LK 1.43]. She may as well be speaking the words of the Confession that we made earlier: *I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray You of Your boundless mercy ... to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.* [LSB DS3] By faith Elizabeth recognizes the Lord her Savior – even though He is quite hidden to sight.

When the Word Comes to John – through Mary and Elizabeth ... while John is still within his mother’s womb – big things happen ... well, at least noticeable things. By God-given faith that comes – always – by the Word, John worships his Savior by leaping in Elizabeth’s womb. And later ... *When the Word Comes to* John in the desert – as we heard in previous weeks – big, important things happen. He begins proclaiming a Baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sin. He proclaims the advent of the long-awaited Savior. And through the Word of God he proclaims, the Holy Spirit is working – just as it did in Elizabeth and Mary and John himself ... even when he was still in the womb – always pointing to Christ.

When the Word Comes to You ... the Holy Spirit does big things – eternally important things. He convicts you of your sin – that’s not so pleasant. Sometimes – quite often, even – you’d really rather **not** have to face those sins ... own up to them ... whatever your sins are. *When the Word Comes to You* ... things start happening – because the Holy Spirit is there ... making sure that the Word does not return to our Triune God empty-handed. Through the Word that comes to you the Holy Spirit works knowledge of sin. Through the Word that comes to you the Holy Spirit works repentance ... creates and sustains faith ... and causes your soul –

even if not always your flesh – to leap for joy because of the surpassing goodness and mercy of the Lord Who came in a human body to do His Father’s will [HEB 10.5-7].

Granted, you are not always like Mary or Elizabeth or John – perhaps **seldom** like them. Your sinful flesh is proud and haughty. It is loath to respond as Mary did when the angel came to her with such incredible news: ***Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*** [LK 1.38]. Or to admit your humble estate as Mary declares in *The Magnificat* as the latter verses of our Gospel are called: ***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant*** [1.46-47]. It is more reluctant still to confess with Elizabeth that it is unworthy, undeserving of the Lord’s gracious presence – even when that presence is hidden under the Means of Grace ... that is, veiled behind the Word and the Sacraments. We very seldom are the self-effacing, humble, repentant vessels that we hear about in Mary, Elizabeth, and John. Instead we are those who are all too often ***proud in the thoughts of their hearts*** whom the Lord must scatter ... thinking that we are ***mighty*** so that He must bring us down from our man-made “thrones” – or pedestals, if you prefer. So ***When the Word Comes to You*** it must **first** cast you down; but then ***the Word Comes to You*** again it lifts you up ... assuring you that your sins forgiven – all of them ... from the greatest to the least – for the sake of Him Who came in the flesh to raise you up and shepherd you in the strength and majesty of the LORD [MIC 5.4].

When the Word Comes to You in the form of the Law to accuse and condemn your sin, it can be a frightening thing – much as Mary was afraid when the angel first appeared to her (as was Zechariah before her). But soon you hear God’s Word: ***Do not be afraid ... fear not ... for you have found favor with God*** [LK 1.30]. Because **The WORD**, the Son of God, came in the flesh at Bethlehem to be JESUS – the One Who saves His people from their sins – the Law no longer will kill you forever. The Ruler ***Whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days*** [MIC 5.2] – indeed, planned from the foundations of the world – **has** come! That’s what we remember and celebrate at ***Christmas*** ... that’s what we are preparing for during this ***Season of Advent*** ... the coming of the Word-made-flesh to save us ... and bring us eternal peace and joy!

When the Word Comes to You ... things start happening! The Word comes to you in Baptism ... and as Holy Scripture says you are *cleansed ... by the washing of the water with the word* [EPH 5.26] – and the Holy Spirit does His work of making you holy ... sanctifying you ... before the Lord ... *that He might present you, the Church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing* [5.27]. The Word comes to you through the reading of the appointed Lessons ... and the Holy Spirit is working – teaching you, convicting you of sin, convincing you of Christ’s saving work on your behalf, assuring you that **your** sins are forgiven for the sake of the Word-made-flesh.

The Word comes to you through the Liturgy – which is, basically, one great proclamation of God’s revelation – and the Holy Spirit is working there. You are reminded of Who the One True God is – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and what He has done for you. You declare the truth revealed in the Word that you are a poor, miserable sinner deserving temporal and eternal punishment ... but a sinner who knows your gracious, merciful, and forgiving heavenly Father because of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Jesus Christ His beloved Son. The Word comes to you in the Absolution ... and you receive the joy of hearing – once again – that your sins are forgiven by your loving God. And again the Word comes to you ... through the Preaching – and the Scriptures you have heard are expounded ... pointing out your sins ... pointing to your Savior from sin, JESUS ... the One Who came to save His people (all people) from sin. The Word comes to you through Holy Communion ... doubly! For you hear the Word of Scripture ... the Words of Your Lord ... and through His eternal, never-changing and always-efficacious Word, the Word-made-flesh Himself comes to you – giving you Himself and all the fruits and benefits of His coming in the flesh ... to assure you that your sins are indeed forgiven ... to comfort you with His presence and give you joy ... and to strengthen you in your faith as you go back out into the world.

When the Word Comes to You ... things happen. It comes through means, to be sure – an angel, the voice of a mother ... or friend ... or pastor, with water, or in-with-and-under the Bread and Wine. But it is God’s Word ... pointing you to The Eternal Word Who came to bring you life and joy.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]