

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Fourth Sunday in Advent, Cycle B – December 17, 2011

Gary Becker

Reflections on **2 Samuel 7:1-5,8b-12,14a,16;**
Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Today's first reading and the gospel have some fascinating contrasts I want to examine. These readings have very different answers to our questions about who is God and where is God.

The first reading has combined two sections from the second book of Samuel. The first is an account of David's plan to build a temple for God, and the second part relates to the Davidic dynasty.

By the time described in the first passage David had come a long way from his beginning as a shepherd boy. He was now the charismatic king who had defeated his enemies and united the Hebrew tribes to form the kingdom of Israel. David had a palace, and peace and prosperity had been achieved.

This passage has David feeling guilty because he lived in a palace while the Ark of the Covenant was still in a tent.

The story says David's prophet Nathan initially approved David's plan to build a temple, but during the night God told Nathan that David was *not* to build a temple. God declared that he was the one who had taken David from the pasture, defeated his enemies and made him King. It was God who made David famous and brought peace to Israel. God didn't need a temple to accomplish any of those things, so God didn't need a temple now.

After pointing out that God doesn't need David's help, and it is David who needs God's help, then God goes on to tell David that he will establish a house – a dynasty, that will last forever.

But reality is different than the promise. A few chapters later David meets Bathsheba,

and then sends her husband Uriah to his death in battle, and Nathan the prophet tells David that God is saying that there will be trouble against him from within his own house.

After David, his son Solomon held the kingdom together but then the downfall began. David's kingdom took place about a thousand years before the birth of Christ. In just a few hundred years the tribes began to battle one another again. And then came the Babylonians who conquered Israel, destroyed Jerusalem, and sent most of the population into exile.

Nonetheless, the Jewish people remember this promise in Second Samuel and it is the source of the Messianic longing. With the end of the Davidic monarchy the Jews interpreted this passage then to be the promise of a Messiah who would be born in David's line. The expectation was this chosen one would reestablish the Kingdom of Israel as a world power.

So now we come to the gospel – the passage we call the Annunciation. I grew up as a Protestant and so the emphasis on Mary was much different than for my Catholic friends. I never spent much time with Mary until about 10 years ago when we did the 30-day Spiritual Exercises retreat. Most of that retreat is praying the life of Jesus, so the Annunciation comes in the early part of the retreat. Not long after the retreat started my director sent me out with the passage that is our gospel today. She gave me instructions to pray all day over that handful of paragraphs. I couldn't grasp the idea of praying all day over on page or less.

But an important part of that retreat is that you were taught to use imaginative prayer. You are to imagine the scene described in scripture and then put yourself in that scene. Then you are asked to just let your imagination go. Do not try to control it, but let it go

wherever the spirit leads. When I did that I found myself in a room in Nazareth and absorbed in the exchange taking place.

Those who were present for our *Mary in Winter* gathering recently at La Casa de Maria can appreciate this experience,



Annunciation by Henry Osawa Tanner
(Philadelphia Museum of Art)

since we saw a number of different visions of what took place in that small room in Nazareth. Several of them were quite grand, but my favorite was a painting by an African-American artist, Henry Tanner.

Of course I liked that painting because it was quite close to my own vision. I also saw the angel as a pillar of light, and Mary as very concerned but also very courageous and self-possessed – very much in touch with her heart. So, to my surprise the imaginative process was powerful for me. I found myself totally absorbed in the ultimate fearlessness of this young girl saying “yes” to God.

It would have been baffling to a young girl in this tiny out of the way town. As an unmarried person in this patriarchal society, she had no power or resources. She would have been considered poor and lonely – an outcast. And if she were pregnant she could be subject to death by stoning.

So what is God telling us in these two stories? In the first reading God is talking to a King who has conquered his enemies and lives in a palace. But a thousand years later God has chosen a poor and powerless woman to be the mother of God. By choosing her to be instrumental in God’s saving plan, God reverses her

standing. In spite of her apparent powerlessness, God shows us she has the strength and ability to make much needed changes in the world. So when the angel leaves, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and proclaims her Cantic, stating that the arrogant will be dispersed, and the hungry filled with good things.

At the beginning I mentioned that these readings had different answers to *who* is God and *where* is God. Mary is told by the angel that God is with her. Much more intimate than God's presence to David, our God is literally with her. She is the dwelling place. She is the new ark. She is the temple. God is literally, physically in her. She is the greater house, the promise to David.

It is not the Kingdom that the Jewish people imagined would come, but it is now clear that the promise in the book of Samuel was not a wealthy Kingdom for the Jews, but a reign of justice and peace for all people.

So what does Mary reveal about the place of women in the church?

To answer that question I quote John Kavanaugh SJ, a scholar at St. Louis University. He notes that we call Mary not only the mother of Jesus, but also the "mother" of divine grace. She is the mirror of justice and the seat of wisdom.

Does not a question suggest itself? If Mary is the Word of God made flesh – could she be a priest?

Mary was the first human person who could say of Jesus "This is my body, this

is my blood." She was the first altar of the Incarnation's mystery.

Was she not then the first priest, the first minister of the sacrament of the real presence? What might we learn from her utter openness to the presence of God? That we too are called to make the Word our flesh.

As I said, those last are not my words, but words from John Kavanaugh, a male Jesuit priest and a teacher.

And what is the relevance of these events so long ago? Tomorrow has been declared by the United Nations as International Migrants Day. The General Assembly has adopted the Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrants. In 2005 there were 191 million migrants in the world. One in every five migrants lives in the United States. Migrants constitute at least twenty percent of the population in forty-one countries.

These people are not pleasure travelers. They are fleeing from violence and war in many cases, as well as from hunger and terrible poverty. Many of these people are like Mary – powerless and outcasts. We must work for laws and policies that recognize that God is also present in these people. In fact, I believe if God chose to send an angel to Santa Barbara county tonight, that angel would be visiting and comforting a young mother of three small children who is living in the Beatitude House in Guadalupe, and suffering from stomach cancer. May God be with her and her migrant sisters and brothers.