

SERMON FOR  
 THE FESTIVAL OF THE ANNUNCIATION  
 Preached March 25, 2009  
 At Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary  
 “THE WORD BECAME FLESH”  
 John 1:14

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Our text for the festival of the annunciation is John 1:14—*the Word became flesh and lived among us*. “The Word become flesh”—few enough words, but more than enough words for a sermon, for a lifetime, for an eternity of meditation.

Quite a few years ago (maybe even before some of you were born) one of the commentators on Monday Night Football was a washed-up Dallas Cowboy quarterback named Dandy Don Meredith. Dandy Don’s function on the broadcast—besides playing the broadcast buffoon—in contemporary terms, the Terry Bradshaw role—Dandy Don’s role was to announce to the fans watching the game the precise moment when the game was over. You might be thinking what is so hard about that?—all you have to do is watch until the clock hits all zeros—and yell “the game is over.” But no, that is not the end of the game I am talking about—I mean the point of the game at which the losing team lost its last hope of victory. You know the situation. There is a minute to go—your team is trailing by three and driving down the field for the tying or winning score—then the quarterback throws an interception right into the hands of the linebacker he never saw. At that moment Dandy Don would break into a chorus of the song “Turn Out the Lights, the Party’s Over.” Maybe that moment of song came already early in the fourth quarter when one team suddenly went up by three touchdowns. I don’t recall that Dandy Don ever blew the call. When he declared the game was over—the game was over. The man had a gift.

In spite of the famous declaration of another sports philosopher, Yogi Berra—that “it ain’t over till it’s over,” we all know that any contest—a game, a war, a political campaign—is often over before it’s over. Especially with the advantage of 20-10 hindsight, Monday morning quarterbacks can often see clearly the point at which the contest was lost, the moment when the loser lost his last hope of victory.

Does this principle apply also to the greatest battle of all time—the battle between light and darkness, between truth and the lie, the battle between life and death, the battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman? When was the game over for Satan? When was his last hope for victory gone?

You Yogi Berras out there might be saying, "The battle is not over. We are still in a war. Satan is fighting to take as many down with him as he can. He will keep fighting until the End." That may be true, but his war has already been lost. His position is as hopeless as that of the Japanese in the fading days of World War II, when the only weapon they had left was suicide. The A-bomb only confirmed the inevitable.

Someone else may be thinking: the war was over when Christ ascended to heaven and took up all power in heaven and on earth. But that was only the welcome home celebration.

Over there you are saying it was over on Easter. We knew it was over when Jesus came back from the dead and handed us the cancelled bill for our sins that said, "Paid for in full." Satan knew it was over when Jesus led his victory parade through the streets of hell, and Satan had to bow before him. At that moment it was made forever clear that Satan is not the warden of hell but just one of the inmates.

Surely it was over when we heard the victory cry, "It is finished," when the earth shook, when the graves opened, and the veil that separated sinful man from a holy God was torn in two, and the door to heaven was open. When Jesus shouted, "It is finished," that cry echoed through the universe—up to the angels in heaven, down to the demons in hell, and into our hearts. The universe knew the battle was over. Christ's victory, our victory was sure.

But I think Satan knew it was over long before then. Did his last hope die during his third great temptation of Christ—the one in Gethsemane, where sweat like great drops of blood poured down Jesus' face until he extinguished Satan's last hope with the resolve, "Not my will but your will be done."

Or was it over already in the second great temptation—when Satan, master of disguises, used not a serpent but Peter as his puppet—but had the door slammed in his face—"Get behind me Satan!"

Did Satan feel the shame of defeat when he looked up from the floor of hell and saw some of his most powerful warriors, who had been glorious angels of light, reduced to a herd of pigs, and Jesus hurled them squealing, tumbling head over heels down the cliffs into the sea and back into the abyss of hell?

Did he feel despair already in the wilderness when all his best tricks fell flat—the scams that had worked so well on so many men for

so many centuries fizzled? Here he was confronted by a man like no other, a man he could not defeat, the man who would not bend, the man who would not break.

Did Satan have an inkling that he was doomed, did his glee turn to gloom as he stood laughing over the bodies of the babies strewn on the streets of Bethlehem, did his heart sink, as he realized he had gotten them all—all, except one? Did panic set in as he looked desperately for the one who was missing? As he saw mother and baby safe on the road to Egypt, did he already know “All is lost”?

I don't know when Satan knew it was over, but I think we can say we know when it was over. It was over on the day that the angel Gabriel arrived in the backwater village of Nazareth to speak to a humble young woman. On that day—the day the Word became flesh—for Satan the party was over, the game was lost, the last hope of winning the war was gone.

The message to the young woman was simple, “You will give birth to a Son and call his name ‘Savior.’ He will be the Son of the Most High.” “How can this be?” she asked. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy one to be born shall be called the Son of God.”

In silence, with no witnesses but the eyes of faith, the Word became flesh. Did the angels in heaven shout for joy or stand in stunned silence? No signs from heaven tell us. The earth did not shake. There was no thunder, no clouds, no rushing wind, the lightening did not shine from east to west. No voice boomed from heaven—“this is my Son.” How silently the wondrous gift was given. The Word became flesh. The world—the universe—would never be the same. The tide of human history had turned.

Satan had seemed to be on a winning streak as God's children suffered defeat after defeat—Satan seemed so close to victory, so many times—Adam and Eve sold love for a lie, the children of God left in this world dwindled down to eight, the promise of the Savior depended on the feeble body of one old man and his barren wife, the king after God's own heart became an adulterer and murderer, only 7000 faithful were left in Israel, the chosen nation was carried away into captivity, the dreary list goes on and on.

But even the fruits of victory turned to ashes in Satan's mouth as he lived up to the name Old 666—always a six, never a seven. In place of Abel came Seth. When the old world ruled by corruption was flushed away by the Flood, a new world emerged in which the promise again found breathing space. Isaac outlasted Ishmael. Jacob survived Esau. David wrote, “Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” That wicked witch of a queen Athaliah killed all the royal sons except one, and the

line of David lived on. A fragment of a nation returned from captivity—faith and hope in the promise lived on through what seemed like defeat after defeat.

Now at last, after centuries in which the promise seemed to hang by a thread, now at last he had arrived—Immanuel—God with us. The everlasting father became Israel's child. David's lord became David's son. God most high, whom angels worship, became our brother.

El Gibbor—God the hero—was here to do battle. And what a battle he fought! He took the field to destroy the works of the devil. Everywhere he went he drove out the demons. As he sent out the first messengers of the gospel, he saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven. As the son of the woman was lifted up from the earth, the prince of this world was thrown out. The power of sin was broken, and sin's child, death, lost its sting. The prisoners were free, and the doors of heaven were open.

The great battle was won by a hero like no other, a hero with the human weakness to die, a hero with the divine power to crush the serpent's head. The body of a man was offered on the altar of the cross. The blood of God made full payment for all the sins of all the world, from Eden to eternity. The world was reconciled to the God who loved it. The war was over. There was peace with God.

On the day the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, the God whom we fled and feared drew near. The Word who was God with the Father from eternity became a baby. He came in the likeness of sinful flesh to do away with sin. When we try to fathom this mystery, reason rambles and worldly wisdom doubts, but faith believes what it cannot see and trusts what it cannot comprehend. We receive no explanation, only the simple words, "the Word became flesh."

The Word became flesh—only a few simple words. The Word became flesh—words enough to fill a sermon. The Word became flesh—words enough to fill a festival. The Word became flesh—words to keep and ponder in our heart. The Word became flesh—words beyond our understanding. The Word became flesh—words to build our faith and future on, words to sing today, words to sing tomorrow, words to sing for eternity with the choirs of heaven—the Word became flesh!

Amen.

### **Homiletical Discussion: Festival Preaching**

#### **The Minor Festivals**

For many pastors preaching on one of the thirty-three minor festivals listed in *Christian Worship* pages 159-160 may be one of the more

challenging homiletical tasks. On the other hand, this may not seem to be too much of a concern for some pastors, since they may not preach on these minor festivals very often. It is quite possible some pastors will never preach on all these festivals in a lifetime of preaching. Though preaching on these festivals seems to be increasing, many of them remain *terra incognita* for many preachers.

The one obvious exception is the festival of the Reformation, which has been fully integrated into the Lutheran church year. Pastors may occasionally preach on God's use of Michael and the holy angels as guardians of his people on those occasions when September 29 falls on a Sunday. Jesus' Name Day or Holy Innocents may be the subject of an occasional sermon when January 1 or December 28 falls on a Sunday. All of these festivals integrate rather easily into the flow of the church year. The message of All Saints Day (November 1) is taken on by one of the Endtime Sundays. New Year's Eve is regularly celebrated, but it is not a traditional church festival. The remaining twenty-seven festivals (mostly saints days) are preached on much less frequently. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that these festivals often do not fit easily into the flow of the church year. Some of them do not seem to contribute a unique point to the church year, and in the minds of some "saints days" may seem "too Catholic."

## The Festival

The festival of the Annunciation (March 25) is one of four "Marian" festivals retained in the *Christian Worship* calendar of festivals. The others are the Presentation (February 2), the Visitation (May 31) and St. Mary's Day (August 15). St. Joseph's Day (March 19) could be included in this list. These four are just a remnant of the many Marian festivals, universal and local, found in the Roman Catholic calendar. These include such unbiblical festivals as the Immaculate Conception (December 8), Mary's birthday (September 8), and celebrations of alleged local appearances of Mary, such as at Guadalupe, Mexico (December 12). The retention of August 15 as the day of Mary in the Lutheran calendar may raise some eyebrows since it is now a day associated with her alleged bodily assumption to heaven. Others of these festivals (Annunciation, Visitation, and Presentation) may be celebrated in a way which is primarily Christological rather than Marian in focus, so they are less problematic. Since these events, however, are covered in the Advent-Christmas season, the additional festivals in other seasons of the church year may seem redundant. But can a festival like the Annunciation, which is placed into the calendar on the basis of the cycle of conception and birth, rather than the flow of the church year, fit smoothly into the worship calendar? The sermon above is an attempt to address this question.

## The Sermon

Our most common practice (for good reason) is to preach on the pericopes of the Sunday or festival. For this reason, the key element of sermon preparation is careful study of the chosen pericope text to determine the key point or points of the text which will be emphasized in the sermon. This can certainly be done also on the minor festivals. But unlike the Sundays of the church year or the major festivals for which the pastor will have the opportunity to preach on all of the appointed lessons, the appearance of a given minor festival on the preaching calendar may be a rare or once-in-a-life-time event for many pastors. In such cases, the preacher may choose to focus first on what is the chief or unique point of the festival as a whole and then to choose a text that addresses that point.

The chosen sermon text may well be one of the three lessons or the psalm for the festival, but in some cases there may be other texts that draw together the main point of the festival more concisely or comprehensively. For example, on Michaelmas a text such as Hebrews 1:14 may allow a more general overview of the role of angels in our lives.

What are the chief points of the festival of the Annunciation? The three chief miracles celebrated by the festival are Mary's faith, the virgin birth, and the incarnation. Mary's model of faith would be a fitting emphasis of the gospel lesson and of the festival. Her faith like ours is a miracle worked by God, and though she has a unique role in God's plan, her faith and obedience are not hers alone, but are shared, for example, by Joseph, whose belief of the annunciation to him amazes us. The birth of a child by a virgin is a great miracle, but if it were only the virgin birth of a man (as Muslims for example believe about Jesus), it would not be the Great Miracle of the festival. That would be the Incarnation—God becoming a man and as the God-man working for our salvation.

An Annunciation sermon could certainly focus on all three of these truths, but the sermon above narrows the focus to the Great Miracle of the festival. Focusing on the incarnation and its continuing results helps the preacher integrate the festival into the flow of the church year, because all of the acts of Christ for our salvation, from beginning to end, are the acts of the incarnate God.

To place the incarnation into the center of the sermon, the first part of the sermon above travels backwards through time from the Last Day to the Incarnation, working from the end results back to the source. The second part of the sermon works from the Fall forward to the Incarnation, allowing the Incarnation also to be the closing emphasis. (This structure has the fringe benefit of making the sermon easier to memorize since the order is chronological. When the preacher

has difficulty with the memorization of the sermon at a given point, the reason is almost always a defect or duplication in the outline.)

The text John 1:14 was chosen because it seemed to crystallize the main point of the festival and to integrate it into the whole life of Christ and into the whole church year. Because of the conciseness of the text, "The Word became flesh and lived among us," the analysis of the text into theme and parts is simple and traditional: I. The Word became flesh, II. He lived among us. The only difference here is that the two parts are preached in reverse order, working back from the results (II. He lived among us) to the beginning (I. The Word became flesh). Though we most often preach from the causes (the biblical events) to the results for us, the reverse order can occasionally provide for variety within the standard forms.

The traditional forms of sermons that we encourage in our homiletics classes, though not sacrosanct or exclusive of other styles, are well tested means of providing text-centered sermons that drive home one or two chief points. Just as the Ordinary does in the liturgy, familiar sermon forms give a common structure to preaching that helps orient the hearer, while at the same time leaving room for the sermon to be shaped by the "proper," the unique emphasis and flow of the specific text. The text shapes the form, not vice versa. Since the main function of the outline, like that of the skeleton, is not to be seen but to support the body, the outline does not always have to be visible on the outside in order to carry out its function.

Since minor festival preaching may often be addressed to special congregations such as student bodies of the ministerial training schools or pastor-teacher conferences, they are an occasion on which the preacher can make greater use of a greater number of biblical allusions with fewer explanations. Pastors' conferences may be one of the best occasions for preaching on the minor festivals since many of these festivals focus on biblical ministers of the Word and on their specific roles in God's plan. They thus are especially applicable to ministers of the Word today. Though preaching on the saints days would often require special preparation on the part of the conference preacher, these festivals could serve as a special source of pastoral encouragement. Perhaps this could be one of the chief roles of the minor festivals among us.