

**A Sermon Preached by  
Fr. Edwin Smith for Advent 4, Year C  
December 20th, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

Where do you go to learn the truth: A dictionary? An encyclopedia? Holy Scripture?

Earlier this week, I received an e-mail message directing me to a website. There I found a video of a sermon by a cleric self-described as a “Progressive Christian.” I am always interested in learning more about phenomena like “Progressive Christianity,” the emerging church, and the emergent church.

This man’s message was nothing but modern Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a heresy as old as the New Testament church (older if you include the Old Testament). Gnostics believe salvation results from experience of a certain kind of knowledge.

One modern Gnostic, in a speech before an annual planned parenthood breakfast said, “The world is not black and white . . . We need to teach people about nuance, about holding things in tension, that this can be true and that can be true, and somewhere between is the right answer. It’s a very adult way of living, you know. What an unimaginative God it would be if God only put one meaning in any verse of Scripture.”

My uneducated response is: “Poppycock, pure poppycock.”

Ancient Gnostics questioned the humanity of Jesus. Some, many, questioned the whole Gospel narrative of his birth.

Why is this important on this last Sunday of advent in the year two thousand and nine? Well, one of the Bible accounts with which the Gnostics would dispense is the one we heard just a few minutes ago.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of two women who share the experience of a holy encounter with God. In one sense, Mary and Elizabeth are unlikely characters for God's drama. But, in another sense, they are no more unlikely than the other characters that appear in other scenes.

Mary and Elizabeth serve as a reminder of God's plan. And their experience is the same experience of God's people, today. His promise today continues to include the presence of his spirit and his blessing for those who truly believe that he will do what he has promised.

Seeing Mary approach, Elizabeth is filled with God's spirit, and she loudly pronounces God's blessing upon Mary and the child she will bear. Mary has willingly cooperated with God, and because of her willing spirit, God's plan will come to completion through her.

God's power is absolute. Yet, he has determined to call for human cooperation as his plan is made known. For that reason, Mary’s willingness to obey is central to the advent story. And, for that reason, Mary is blessed. God's people today are blessed, as well, when they cooperate with God.

Elizabeth, too, is blessed. She is aware that God is at work around her. She understands that she, herself, is favored, because God's chosen one stands in her presence. God has graciously allowed Elizabeth to see and understand that he is at work. God's people today are blessed, as well, when they are able to see God at work. And their response is the same joy that Elizabeth experienced.

The focus of Mary's response to God can be found in her obedience. Beyond that, however, Mary's faith is demonstrated in her willingness to believe that God is able to do just what he has promised.

We would do well today to remember just how impossible God's word to Mary had been. His promise was absurd, unlikely, and even ridiculous. And yet, she chose to believe. God's people today are blessed, as well, when they choose to believe God will fulfill his promises, even those that seem absurd, and unlikely, and ridiculous.

E. Stanley Jones referred to Mary's song, *The Magnificat*, as the most revolutionary document in the world. Indeed, it is clear that Mary has grasped the true nature of the coming kingdom.

The song proclaims the downfall of the proud and the exaltation of the lowly, the casting down of the mighty and the raising up of the humble, the hungry being filled and the rich being sent away empty. The essence of Mary's song is that God desires and intends to usher in a time of heavenly revolution. Although that is not often how we think about Bethlehem, that is exactly what happened on that first Christmas.

Amazingly, Mary is able to recognize the true nature of the kingdom, and her song pronounces the purposes and blessing of God. God's people today are blessed, as well, when they understand the true nature of God's kingdom.

And so, we return to my misguided friend of the video clip, delivering a sermon which repudiated much of what we believe about the birth life, and death of Jesus.

Like ancient Gnostics, and modern ones, he masquerades as a legitimate clergyman. He speaks with a personal charism which makes his message sound plausible.

Gnostics are all around us, my friends. The Jesus they preach is not the Jesus of the Holy Scriptures. He is a manufactured product of people more in love with their own musings than with the truth.

Several folks in our parish have hosted sessions on the "truth project." I encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity to become more fully aware of the truth of holy scripture.

As we come ever nearer to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, let us not lose sight of who it is we await. It is Jesus, son of God, fully human/fully God, prince of peace, bearer of truth, born of Mary, crucified for our sins, risen from the dead.