

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 24, 2017

2 Samuel 7: 1 – 11, 16

Romans 16: 25 – 27

Luke 1: 26 – 38

Psalm 89: 1 -4, 19 – 26

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A few years ago I had occasion to take a one-week course in iconography, the painting or writing of icons. The teacher was Vladimir Andreev. He was an elderly Russian who immigrated to this country; he spoke no English.

Vladimir demonstrated brush strokes and ground exotic stones to make the pigments for the painting. His wife Olga translated for him.

Vladimir taught a method of preparing icons that had been used in Russia for hundreds of years. Nothing is new or original. The painting is done on wood coated with many layers of white gesso; the figure is incised on the surface using a sharp stylus. The actual painting is made by layer after layer of egg tempera.

The halo of the figure is made with layers of red clay. Thin sheets of gold leaf are used for the subject's halo. It is applied by breathing on the clay to soften the clay. The symbolism is of God breathing life into Adam. The gold leaf adheres to the clay.

After several weeks, when the icon has dried, it is sealed with warmed linseed oil. When the icon is finished the name of the subject is written in English or, for purists, Greek.

To one who is not Russian It may seem strange to say that the work is never actually original. For centuries icons have been made in patterns established long ago. There are only a few subjects; Saints, Our Lord Jesus Christ, Archangels and the Virgin Mary. Historically, of the four subjects the Virgin Mary has been the most popular, the most often written.

Mary is called the *Theotokos*, the “God Bearer” in Greek. She is most often depicted holding the infant Jesus in her arms, tenderly looking at Him. In those icons she is seen as calm and serene, a mature woman. The sort of woman who really could be in the presence of a shining angel and say to him “Let it be to me according to your word.” But, of course, the one in our reading from Luke is not the serene, mature woman of the icons.

Mary is not the distraught mother looking for her child in the streets of Jerusalem, finding Him in the Temple. She is not the heartbroken mother weeping at the foot of the cross on which that child, now grown to manhood, is crucified. All those will come later.

Mary is a young girl, a teenaged girl, betrothed, which really means “single” in a small town named Nazareth who suddenly finding herself “favored of God” and pregnant.

Mary replies “Let it be to me according to your word” knowing full well that the village will gossip; that the people won’t believe a word of it; that Joseph would have every right to abandon her; that her family would be disgraced to have an unwed, pregnant daughter; and that she would, in all probability, die.

Could she have said “no?” Could she have denied herself to God? Could she have refused to do His will?

That’s really not so strange an idea. People are denying God all the time for all sorts of reasons.

Personally, I found good reasons for postponing a very serious call to be ordained for years. My Army career was going very well, I was being given excellent assignments or being sent to graduate programs. I actually turned down an

assignment to Hawaii, then to Germany, and accepted an assignment to Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia. There I found an Episcopal church and a priest who made me seriously question if I could continue saying “no.” In retrospect I realize that was God saying “Enough already!” I retired there and went to seminary.

Actually, we usually call denying God “sin.” Mary is the very antithesis of sin. Mary is the symbol of absolute, unqualified faith. She knows, even then, that if what she is called to be is the will of God, no matter how strange and fearsome and inexplicable it might be, it is right and good.

In a few words she commits herself to all that is right and good.

In those few words a teenage girl in a tiny village opens the world, this world, our world, to the presence of the living God, the Creator becoming one with His Creation. In those few words the world is changed forever.

You know, we could use a hero or a heroine in this complex, relativistic age of ours. We could use one who can and hear angels delivering the message of God to His children. We could use a double dose of faith and commitment. What greater or more perfect model might we have than Mary?

In His Holy Name.