

DECEMBER 18, 2005: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

II Samuel 7:1-5,8-11,16 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

Throughout the movie *Field of Dreams*, the Kevin Costner character tries to follow the command of the voice he hears telling him, "If you build it, he will come." He eventually figures out that the "it" is a ball diamond in the middle of an Iowa cornfield; he presumes the "he" is his deceased father's hero from his youth, Shoeless Joe Jackson. Though he succeeds in building the diamond and bring Jackson and some of his fellow players back from the dead, only at the end of the movie do we (and he) discover that the "he" who comes is actually his father.

Scripture students probably figured out that the movie's end wouldn't be so simple. They frequently deal with parallel scenarios in the texts they study.

In today's II Samuel passage, for instance, David's obsessed with building a "house" for Yahweh. He initially gets the okay for the project from the prophet Nathan. But that night, Yahweh appears to the prophet and redirects David's plans. God will see it that a house will be built, but it won't be Yahweh's; it will be David's. The next morning, Nathan conveys God's plan to the king: "He will establish a house for you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever . . . , your throne shall stand firm forever."

We find something similar in our gospel pericope. Of course, we're so accustomed to Mary's participation in Jesus' conception and birth that we can't imagine his being in our midst without her. We forget that the historical Mary of Nazareth wasn't looking in the same direction as we. Though she no doubt anticipated and prayed for Yahweh's saving of her people, she never gave herself a role in that salvation. Like most of us, she presumed she'd simply be a witness to the event, recognizing and thanking God when it finally arrived. She never dreamed she'd be an actual participant in something so tremendous.

Her anticipation of God's salvation was instantly redirected by Gabriel's announcement: "You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus. Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will be without end."

No wonder Mary's first question is, "How can this be . . . ?" She obviously had other plans.

Yet, as we hear in today's Romans reading, such redirection didn't stop with Mary. Immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers presumed he came only the Chosen People. He was Jewish, he had preached a reform for Jews, all his disciples were Jews. Any Gentile interested in implementing his message and imitating his lifestyle, had first to convert to Judaism. It took a generation before some Christians began to understand that non-Jews were as welcome to share in the faith of Jesus as Jews were.

One of those liberal, insightful Christians, Paul of Tarsus, often reflected on that change of plans. His experience of evangelizing Gentiles forced him to reinterpret both his preconceived notions and the Scripture texts he presumed supported them. He eventually discovered that God's plan of salvation wasn't as clear-cut as he had imagined.

He informs the Christian community in Rome that the gospel he proclaims ". . . reveals a mystery hidden for many ages but now manifested through the writings of the prophets, and at the command of the eternal God, made known to all the Gentiles" How could a dedicated Jew such as Paul eventually find his destiny in announcing God's salvation to non-Jews? It's one of the most dramatic turnabouts in history.

Today's three readings remind us not to become too comfortable in our faith. Our biblical authors warn us not to predict the end of the movie before the credits roll.

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This essay is provided by the Fellowship of Southern Illinois Laity (now the Faithful of Southern Illinois). Please share it with a friend.