

The Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your *daily visitation*, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may *find in us a mansion prepared for himself*; who lives and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. ***Amen***

God Contained?

On Christmas Eve, as we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, we will sing a most beautiful and gentle hymn, "In the bleak midwinter", soft and delicate like snowflakes. Verse two confirms, "Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain; heaven and earth shall flee away, when He comes to reign. In the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed - the Lord God incarnate, Jesus the Christ."

What can hold our God?

It's just mind-boggling to me, that The Creator of all things,
The one who created heaven and earth
and whom earth and even heaven itself cannot contain,
would willingly go to the point of complete self-emptying,
to be contained within the womb of a young woman.

I want to share with you a portion of a sonnet written by
the late 16th century, preeminent metaphysical poet and
Anglican cleric John Donne. It's called 'The Nativity'.

*"Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves His well-belov'd imprisonment,
There He hath made Himself to His intent
Weak enough, now into the world to come;
But O, for thee, for Him, hath the inn no room?
Yet lay Him in this stall, and from the Orient,
Stars and wise men will travel to prevent
The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.
Seest thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how *He*
Which fills all place, yet none holds Him, doth lie?
Was not His pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss Him, and with Him into Egypt go,
With His kind mother, who partakes thy woe."*

It is God who chooses *where* to dwell, *how* to dwell.
What a paradox then, that God chose to be conceived!
God who cannot be contained, chose to be contained,
For us!!! And it begins with Mary’s consent.

Merriam-Webster defines the womb as
a “cavity or space.. containing and enveloping;
a place where something is generated.”

What is generated,
is the beginning of the living-abode of God for all people.
God didn’t want to be ‘out there’.
God wanted absolutely to erase any perception of distance
between God’self and God’s offspring.

Through the annunciation,
the invitation is made by the Holy Spirit
for humanity to become co-inhabitants *with* God
And... God *with* us.

In this moment described by Dionysius the Areopagite,
as “Theogenesis” the advent of Christ-awareness –
dualism between God and God’s creature is shattered.

It is the final fruit of the annunciation.

God choosing *where* and *how* to dwell is God's prerogative! Compare the annunciation with David's well-intentioned and misguided offer to build God a dwelling place as we hear in the first reading from 2nd Samuel.

Even the prophet Nathan agrees with David and says, of course, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you." But God says, hold on there - don't be so hasty with those hammers and cedar boards! God reminds David just who has the authority to determine *where* God will live.

For me, this evokes the scene from the Transfiguration atop the mountain, when Peter blurts out that he should build three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah; an offer rejected by God.

God has a different vision of *where* and *how* God will consent to be contained.

Not only that but it is *God* who is the architect and builder. God will build a house for David... yes, a house that doesn't require homeowners insurance, neither flood nor wind damage riders.

It will outlast any manmade construction.
The house of David shall last forever.
That is the unconditional promise.
Jesus *is* that promise delivered.

So then, how is it that David's family throne crumbles?
What kind of senseless hope remained for Israel?
Did God forget his promise? Never.
Because even while the kingdom of Israel fell apart;
the kingdom of God remained alive.

Through the prophet Amos, God promised,
"After this, I will return and I will rebuild
the dwelling of David which has fallen; from its ruins
I will rebuild it and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord –
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called."

(Acts 15:16-17)

A radical hope for a Messiah flickering in their hearts
kindled into God's blazing promise fulfilled –
when Mary, betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David,
agreed to make room for God to grow.
Imagine that!

-God taking shelter, within the confines of flesh,
not in buildings of cedar, nor in grand cathedrals!
God said Yes! to being contained in human form.

But contrary to God being confined or limited by flesh,
God is freed, as we become a vessel for God, to freely move
about the world, caring for all God's children.

The Word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Nathan
reminded King David, and us, that God has always been
with God's people, and moves freely among the peoples.

With the incarnation, *our* bodies,
become the dwelling place of the Most High.
Any distance between us and God is gone for ever.
God merges the divine and temporal realms.
Divinity, space, and time become one –
in the instant Mary says Yes! to God's will.

20th century Swiss RC priest and theologian,
Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, "In light of Mary's 'simple'
experience of motherhood, which in her has become a
function of the archetypal act of faith, all closed consciousness
of self and all closed experience of self, become problematic:

the experience of self must open out through faith,
to an experience that encompasses both oneself and the
other – oneself and the burgeoning Word of God. At first,
as with Mary, this seems to be growing in the self,
until in this very growth it becomes evident
that is the other way round.

It is the self that is contained in the Word of God.

Like Mary, do we also create room for God,
a place where new life is generated,
a space that contains and envelopes God?

We all know the over-used phrase that realtors tout,
"location, location, location!"

If we were to inquire with God,
"Where do you desire most to live?"

We know God's answer.

When we sing the hymn *How Lovely is thy Dwelling Place*,
we are singing about us!

We are that dwelling place - each one of us.

It doesn't matter to God - whether king or maiden –except
to open the door of the heart so that God may enter.

We are the *only* mansion where God desires to live as 17th century mystic, Theresa of Avila confirms in *The Interior Castle*.

We may tend to think of "The Annunciation/or Visitation" as a one-time occurrence.

But in reality, when we say Yes! to God moving in with us, it's perpetual and it's permanent.

When we live somewhere, and call it home, it isn't, *at least hopefully*, an on and off again event – unlike the electric power supply to our homes during the midst of heavy recent winter storms!

As humans, we **do** require shelter and stability; a place to be contained - to feel rooted and planted, safe and secure.

And yes, God is present in our churches and Zoom-rooms when we come together in worship as a faith community.

God *does* recognize our creaturely need, as it is written in the book of 2nd Samuel:

"And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more."

That's why outreach programs like food pantries,
and Habitat for Humanity are so important.
We build homes for us to live in, but just as God made
known to us in the annunciation,
It matters where and how:
the **true *building (verb tense) begins in the heart*** –
manifested in the way we meet the needs of others,
with compassion.

God *won't* be contained,
but God *will* dwell in each and every one.
It's ironic that kings need castles and rulers need thrones
but God needs only a manger, and room in a heart.

Jesus said, "If someone loves me, they will keep my word,
and my Father will love them,
and we will come and make our home with them." (Jn 14:23)
Amen

Amma Susan