

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
December 8, 2018

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How appropriate that the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception occurs during the season of Advent! These four weeks commemorate the long period of preparation between the *promise* of Genesis 3 and the *fulfillment* proclaimed triumphantly in Galatians. After man's disobedience and sin, in the Genesis passage there is this promise: God declares to the serpent "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed, and it shall bruise thy heel and thou shalt bruise his head." But then centuries later in Galatians St Paul announces to one and all: "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons."

Notice that a woman figures prominently in both the promise and the fulfillment. *That woman is no bystander!* In God's plan she is part of both the promise and fulfillment, and we see glimpses of her in the long Old Testament story about her Son. In that story the longing for Christ is sometimes told with incomparable clarity. Isaiah always comes to mind. He is sometimes called "the fifth evangelist." And it is no wonder the Church draws so much on Isaiah's prophecy for her Advent liturgy. Other parts of the Old Testament anticipate the Gospel as well, simply by the *density of the shadows!* That is much in the same way as night is darkest just before the dawn. But God's promise from way back in Genesis 3 was standing sure all through the long years. It was a promise of a redeemer, the seed of the woman.

Disobedient Eve thought she was on the fast track! She thought she was *the woman* and that the promise would be fulfilled in her. When Cain was born Eve thought, "I have gotten the man from the Lord." But look at the disappointment! In her son Cain Eve would only see the aggravation of her own sin. The parents had broken away from love of God. Their son Cain would murder his brother Abel. *Sin spreads!* That is the verdict of the whole Bible.

Sin became worse, and the promise seemed further off. That promise was of a *new* Adam and a *new* Eve. The woman would be a sign of hope that the time has come. The victor would be Christ the new Adam. But the promise of the Savior was introduced by the image of the humble and courageous woman who is set as a sign

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against the evil one, against disobedience, against all who in arrogance and pride refuse to adore God and will not love their fellow man.

Leave it to Isaiah in a time of great national and spiritual distress to see so clearly ahead. His words are so familiar to us they may have lost their astonishing original force. “The Lord God Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His Name Emmanuel.” Remember that in Israel as in most other ancient lands it was the right of the *father* to name his son. But here the naming is given to the virgin, who is the only true image of God since the Garden of Eden. She will name the promised Savior. *Emmanuel* means ‘God with us.’ And the virgin can name God’s Son *because God is with her!* The archangel Gabriel would announce this very thing at the Annunciation. And when Gabriel declares “The Lord is with thee” it is announced *as an already established fact*. The Lord is with Mary. She is full of grace. In a once-only-and-for-ever way, Our Lady has *in herself the nearness of the Lord*, and everything about her says to you and me “*the Lord is near.*”

There was sin through fallen human nature. And it was everywhere. But in the quiet home where two people named Joachim and Anna lived, the springtime of creation came all but unnoticed. There were no angels, no shepherds visited, and no star guiding wise men. But Mary herself was the new Eve, *obedient* Eve, *reversed* Eve. That is why Mary was the sinless paradise out of which God’s Own Son would take flesh.

It is as Saint Anselm declared. God is the Father of creation. Mary is the mother of the recreated world. God gave life. But His will was that this woman, spotless maiden Mary, would be the mother through whom all things are given new life, a new life that is Jesus Christ our Lord!