

4 Advent
December 20, 2020

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

On this, our last Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention from John the Baptist and his insistent message that we must prepare the way for our Lord Jesus to come into our lives, to today's focus on the angel's proclamation to Mary ... and her response.

What Christian doesn't know the story of Mary and the angel? This story of the Annunciation to Mary, and to the world -of God breaking into our world – is tremendously powerful. It is the story of the Creator finding a way to be united with, to become one with God's precious creation. We think of breaking through the sound barrier as being a feat of power. We are in awe as we listen for the first time to the news of mankind breaking into space. But, this story is so much more than that. It is the announcement that divinity is about to break into humanity. Now that's powerful!

This isn't about the visit of a religious leader or of a head of state. It is not about a guru planning to visit his disciples. And, it isn't only a story about Mary and the visit of an angel. No, it is much more than that for it is really about God's relationship with his beloved...the likes of us. The truth is: God has always been one with his creation. It is not that we were created and then God went away, separated from the creation. Actually, it was the other way around. The very people who had been made in the image and likeness of God had separated their lives from the God of all life. In our Eucharistic Prayer C we say: "Again and again you called us to return, but, we turned away from you and we betrayed your trust." What was God to do? If the people of God could not or would not hear the call of God, then God would have to speak through the voice of a human being. God would be born to earth and make known in Jesus the true bond and intimacy of the Creator and the created ones.

Once each year, Christmas comes along to renew our hope and to remind us that the darkness of this world *cannot* overcome the light of our Lord. In pondering the words from Luke this morning, it is not difficult to get a sense of that "time out" moment that Christmas brings. That moment when our hope is indeed renewed, for ourselves, for our families, for our church, for the world. It is a hope in God's divine intervention into human affairs, a hope for the world's recovery from our experience of this dreadful pandemic and the reality of our ongoing racial and economic injustices and all the pain of all of that in so many ways.

Christmas *is* a miracle. There is no doubt about it. But when would we say the miracle began? With the birth of Jesus? Or earlier with Gabriel's proclamation to Mary... or even to Elizabeth and Zechariah? And how much of the story need we absorb in order to understand it as a mysteriously joyous event, a life changing miracle with the power to transform people? I think the answers vary as our faith grows and matures. Even as impossible as the annunciation to Mary, and Elizabeth's pregnancy at an advanced age sound, the words still have the power to change lives. Because truly, the unanswerable argument for the power of God is that wherever he is sincerely followed, lives are changed.

Christmas is a special time, a magical time, a time of anticipation. A small piece of the year when we expect miracles. Maybe this is because childhood innocence informs us that Santa Claus is flying around nearby. Maybe it is because our own children or grandchildren are so excited about the surprises that await them on Christmas morning that some of their excitement rubs off on us. Maybe it is because we feel especially benevolent toward needy people at this time of the year. Watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” or “A Christmas Carol” helps to nurture that feeling, and maybe even helps us to act on it in some way.

And why does this sense of the miraculous, just around the corner, beckon us to try to make a little extra time for others at Christmas? Could it be that we are somehow transformed by the sense of the presence of Christ in our hearts? Mary believed in what God, through the Holy Spirit, could do. She was not disappointed. Belief in the transforming power of God’s love at this time of the year, and indeed, at every time of our lives, is the true miracle. It is true joy and that joy is meant to be shared. Through Christ, God has come to us to redeem us.... with a grace that is never of human achievement, but always a divine gift. That is the very heart of Christmas. It is a supreme blessing, but it is also a supreme mystery, worthy of God I should say!

Albert Einstein once said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” Certainly, there *is* unquestionably, a mystery about God’s ways, about the peace that can come to us in the face of adversity, about the inspiration we feel to be *selfless* rather than *selfish*, especially at this time of the year. There is a mystery about what happened to Elizabeth and certainly to Mary.

But, we too can experience the joy they knew in some other ways. May we invite Christ into our lives, into our hearts and thereby allow our lives to be transformed so that no matter what we are experiencing in our lives, we may also know that there is a God who loves us, who cares for us and who will bless us and fill us with great joy if we only allow ourselves to trust in his wonderful grace.

Mary said, “My soul proclaims...my spirit rejoices...the Almighty has done great things for me.” Nothing could be more deeply personal. This is a marvelous example of a genuine sense of the self as a receiver and as a channel of grace from outside the self. Mary knows she is unworthy, but at the same time she is deeply conscious of herself as a channel of God’s grace and God’s action. This doesn’t mean that she understands what is taking place. All she knows is that something extraordinary is taking place and that she has said yes to God. This magnificent song which she declared, this Magnificat, as we call it, becomes powerful to the extent that each one of us can make it our own.

Our church tradition abounds with such phrases as “the faith of the church” or “the faith once delivered to the saints”. And all of this is wonderful as long as there comes a moment when we appropriate this faith to *ourselves*, when the faith becomes MY faith. There has to be a moment when we sense that something of God is being born in us and we say, with Mary, “MY soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. MY spirit rejoices.” The fact is, we are all in a sense, Mary, each one of us a potential being in which the eternal Christ wants to be born.

In today’s Gospel we heard: “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town.” We don’t know why she went. Perhaps Elizabeth was the one person who would understand the way that Mary’s world had exploded. The point for us is that she went because she had to share her

news. As she journeys, she calls everyone of us to travel with her, to learn to share in some way, the faith that is in us. Most of us do not find this easy. And yet, it can be so simple to state that you have found something you value in your worshipping community. No great proclamations, just a simple reasonable statement. Sometimes there may be someone present whose heart beats a little faster because of the possibility of finding a Christian community again, or perhaps for the first time. As with Elizabeth, a child of new-born faith may leap within. If we discover new faith, or *deeper* faith kindled in us for reasons we don't know...then, moreover, we may realize that the gift has been given so that we may respond by acting in some important or special way.

And there is something else that we may appropriate to our own experience. Speaking to Mary, Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Mary assumed that the message of the angel WOULD come true. The same needs to be true in our own soul's journey. We need to be a person who EXPECTS God's promises to come true.

When we receive the food of the Eucharist, and now with the nourishment of our Spiritual Communion, we are given a promise of God. He has told us he will be with us. Sometimes that promise is expressed in the words "feed on him in your heart with thanksgiving". Sometimes we are reminded that this food is the "bread of heaven." Perhaps these wonderful statements slide across our minds and are gone. But we need to hear clearly and piercingly that we are being promised spiritual grace for our lives. This is essential for our souls' nurture and strength.

John Lennon sang a hauntingly beautiful song named "Imagine." "Imagine all the people living in peace...no need for greed or hunger...imagine all the people sharing all the world."

In a sense, we are all, each of us, MARY, each one of us a precious human being in whom the eternal Love of Christ wants to be born. The more we become conscious of such things, the greater their power to nourish us. The more we believe them to be true, the more they grace us. And then, as with Mary, the things of God come to fruition within us.

As one of our beautiful hymns says, "May my soul, like Mary, be an earthly sanctuary."

AMEN