

This week, as I was sadly reminiscing over the reality that our children won't be putting on a Christmas program this year, I began to think back to when I was a little boy in Sunday school. During those days it seemed like most every child secretly yearned to play the coveted role of Mary or Joseph in the annual Christmas play. After all, along with Jesus, they are the stars of the show are they not? Without them there would be no Christmas celebration. Without them who would the wise men, the angels and the shepherds go visit?

Today's Gospel story may seem very familiar to us, it is a tale that many of us I'm sure grew up learning about in Sunday School and in Christmas pageants, but it is also very radical. St. Luke tell us that God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to visit a young girl by the name of Mary who was a descendant of King David. Scholars suggest that she was a teenager, perhaps around 13 or 14 years of age. And in those days and in that culture, it was normal that a girl of her age might be engaged to be married just as she was.

What was not so normal was to have an angel visitation. In both the Old and New Testaments we witness God sending angels to earth only in extremely special circumstances in which God needed to intervene in Worldly affairs. When this happened, he usually sent his messengers to comfort, guide, protect, and to announce. Jacob wrestled with an angel and received the blessing of a new name and his heritage, Israel. An angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush, Daniel claimed that one of God's messengers shut the mouths of the lions in den he had been tossed into, and in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, Zecahariah (John the Baptist's father) was praying in the temple when he received a visit from the angel Gabriel informing him that he was going to be a dad.

Getting back to our Story for today, what was also not normal was to be told that one would become the mother of God's Son. So, we can appreciate Mary's response to the angel's initial greeting of peace, when we read that she was deeply

troubled by the angel's message and she wondered what it all meant. Would it be too much to say that Mary was in shock, in awe, and perhaps even terrified by what came next? The angel said to her: *"Don't be afraid, Mary, for God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was and...his kingdom will never end!"*

Mary's response to the angel's declaration demonstrates that she believes his message of promise, but does not understand how it would be fulfilled. Although she was poor and probably uneducated, it's safe to assume that she did understand the birds and the bees. So she questions the angel asking him, *"How can this be? For I am a virgin."* Mary and Joseph had chosen to remain celibate until their wedding day, as was their religious tradition and custom. So she is therefore a bit perplexed and confused by the announcement given by God's Holy messenger, probably even a bit terrified. Think of the consequences, think of the scandal. How would she explain this to Joseph, her fiancé? Would anyone believe her? Did she even believe it herself?

The angel Gabriel goes on to explain that God will send the Holy Spirit to her and that through the miraculous power of God, Mary will conceive and bare a son. And after providing her with this clarification and clearing up some of the confusion brought about by his message, he then offers her some encouragement by informing her that her older cousin Elizabeth, who had been told could not have children, by some miracle was now six months pregnant. And so Gabriel concludes: *"Believe it. There is not a thing that God cannot do!"*

Ok....so as we reflect on this all too familiar story, I invite you to consider what you might have done if you had been in Mary's shoes? Would you have believed it then? Would you be able to believe it now? Can your faith help you

understand, like Mary, that there is nothing God cannot do?! This is especially important when our best laid plans begin to unravel.

Consider the testimony regarding Jesus' conception found in Luke's Gospel...It begins with a nice engaged couple, about to start a wonderful lifelong relationship together, when all of a sudden the bride-to-be is "found to be with child by the Holy Spirit." This was not in their plan! We read later that Joseph almost breaks off the engagement, but once again God intervenes through an angelic visitation. Like another Joseph whose life was shaped by dreams and a colored coat, this man who was chosen to be the earthly father of God's own Son, bows to God's will. Both he and Mary respond to their new challenge, and call to parenthood, with faith and obedience.

Neither of them allowed their fears or concerns to prevent them from living out their lives for God! There is a lesson here for us all, is there not? We may think we have our lives all figured out. We may think we know what we want and where we're going. Then God intervenes in the challenges and opportunities that come our way—and things can change. A former colleague of mine once warned me about being too sure of myself, suggesting that God's plans and our plans are not always the same.

Which begs the question, are we open to where God may be leading us—as individuals and as a congregation? Is it possible for us to muster up the kind of faith and courage of someone like Mary and commit ourselves to doing God's will, regardless of the sacrifices we might be called to make? Can we look beyond any fears and doubts we may have that prevent us from living out our lives for God?

During this Advent season, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birthday and prepare ourselves for his coming again, we should ask ourselves if we are prepared to take orders from the Son of the Most High God, just as Mary and Joseph obeyed the orders God gave them through an angel. Sure, it goes without saying that it is

rather easy for us to worship a baby who asks nothing of us, but a bottle and perhaps a diaper change. But are we willing to praise a King who gives us the directive, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you?”

Are we going to adore the ruler who says, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also? Are we likely to bow gracefully to the one who commands, “Give to everyone who begs from you?” No, it’s much easier to worship a powerless baby. But if we love our enemies, do good, and lend without expectation of return, we will be acting as obedient servants of our powerful King. “Your reward will be great,” promises Jesus, “and you will be children of the Most High.”

Our narrative this morning is an excellent reminder that obedience is a key component of our faith, to help us live out the expectations the Son of the Most High God has for us. At the end of today’s passage, Mary takes a deep breath, then makes a stunning leap of faith, “Here am I, the *servant of the Lord*; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary says “yes” to what God wants to do in her life, and this decision reveals that she is the “favored one” willing to put her complete trust in God. She calls herself the “servant of the Lord,” and in so doing becomes a model for the rest of us!

If we want to follow Jesus, and continue to celebrate his life and love in our own lives, we need to remember that servanthood is part of our discipleship. This means finding the Lord’s favor through faith, believing that God is always with us, trusting Jesus to save us, and showing obedience to the Son of the Most High. Serving God, as Mary did, begins with saying “yes!”

There is a Christmas hymn that reminds us of the contribution of Mary and Joseph and of all parents everywhere who loved, who sacrificed, who inspired their children to believe in themselves and in God. “*For Joseph and for Mary and other*

parents dear; who in our memory have made God's message clear; who by their love and kindness have walked God's way among us; our thanks for those who cared, who cherished, nurtured, and shared." For Mary, and all of the wonderful obedient characters found in the Christmas story we say thanks be to God. Amen.