

December 20, 2020

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Today we begin the fourth, and final “week” of Advent---though since Christmas is just 5 days away, this is one of the shortest “weeks” of the year. The 4<sup>th</sup> Candle on the Advent Wreath is lit. Even the Weather is trying to put us in the mood. Along with this being the “shortest week” of the year Liturgically, tomorrow is the “shortest day” of the year in terms of daylight, marking the “winter solstice” that will take place tomorrow morning at 5:02 a.m. Astronomers tell us Jupiter and Saturn will almost align later this week, forming what many refer to as the “the Christmas Star” in the Western sky. The temperatures are dropping and the long-range weather forecast is talking about a good chance for a “white Christmas”. So, even Nature seems to be getting ready.

I’m sure that also applies to all of us who are, no doubt busy with all the last-minute preparations that go into getting ourselves “ready” for Christmas: the shopping, wrapping, baking, cleaning, decorating, and Christmas greetings and gifts to be sent or delivered. Since it appears our Christmas celebrations and gatherings this year will be more restrictive, due to the ongoing pandemic, even how we prepare this year is different.

Even today’s Scripture Readings help us to have that same sense----“a momentous Event” is at hand. Today’s Gospel is that beloved and familiar account of the Annunciation we hear each year in these last few days of Advent. It’s important though for us to reflect on the profound meaning of that Divine Encounter. Because we’ve heard it so often, perhaps we run the risk of losing sight of how monumental this “moment” was in all of Salvation History---how life-changing this was for Mary; how history-altering this was for all the world.

St. Luke is masterful in how he depicts this amazing Divine Encounter. The way he writes it, it reminds me in a way of that very beloved movie “It’s a Wonderful Life”. If you remember, it begins with two Angels talking together from Heavenly Heights about “Clarence”, a Guardian Angel in training, who is about to be given his mission to help save George Bailey. St. Luke gives us a similar kind of image of Gabriel, and almost like the electronic app that many of us have---Google Earth---looking at the world, then focusing in on that section called Galilee, then finding the little town called Nazareth, pinpointing the particular house where Mary was

living, and then appearing to her with those famous words, which form the beginning of one of our most treasured prayers: *“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!”* St. Luke states the obvious, that *“Mary was deeply troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be”*. And then Gabriel says: *“Do not be afraid, Mary.”*

While I’m sure Gabriel intended those words to be reassuring and comforting, the fact is that there was an Angel standing in Mary’s house, talking with her, an extraordinary event by anyone’s standards, which surely would have had any of us, including me, shaking in my boots. Heaven was standing in front of her, and was about to ask something of her. It was very clear to Mary that whatever the Angel would say next undoubtedly would change her life forever. Then Gabriel explains the Plan, in quite some detail: he tells her that 1) she would conceive a child, and it would not be through Joseph, her betrothed or any other man; 2) that child would be her son; 3) but that child would also be the Son of the Most High; and 4) that she would name Him “Jesus”.

Mary asked only one question: *“How can this be?”* The Angel elaborated: 1) the Power of the Most High through the Holy Spirit of God will *“overshadow you”*, 2) you will conceive a son, and 3) He will be called *“holy, the Son of God”*. 4) And one final point: even though this might seem impossible to you, *“nothing is impossible for God”*.

Mary’s greatness here is two-fold. First of all is her deep Faith. She could see the Angel, and hear his words, which in the face of all human reason made no sense; but in Faith, she believed that God could do, and would do, whatever He chose to do. The second reason that Mary is so great is her incredible willingness to say “Yes”. What if she had said “No”??? What if she, like Zachary, expressed doubt, or was skeptical, or asked for a week to think about it? After all, Mary was fully aware that for her to become pregnant outside of wedlock was, at that time, punishable by death; she knew she was risking her life. But her deep love for God and her strong Faith allowed her to immediately say: *“Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”*

And that was that. The Angel was gone. Jesus’ conception took place within her virginal womb thru the power of the Holy Spirit. And Mary was left to “ponder” what all of this meant”, which is another aspect of Mary’s greatness: to work through the hundred follow-up questions she might have had, but drawing the conclusion that “God would provide”; all she had to do was to say “Yes”.

Mary is such an incredibly important Model for all of us. Mary is not a spirit, nor an Angel. Mary is a human being, just like all of us----with the one, notable distinction that she had been conceived without the effect of Original Sin, which is the common denominator for all the rest of humanity. Still, she was a human being----a “teenager”. Now, we all know teenagers; my youngest niece Alayna is a teenager, and turns 18 today. But in my mind, she’s still a little girl. So that was a LOT to ask of a teenager, or young maiden. But God also knew that she was a person of deep Faith----and a person with an enormous, generous, loving heart. Mary teaches us to be aware of our limitations and deficiencies, but don’t lose sight on our strengths and our capabilities. Again, we need to remember that Mary didn’t walk on water----she couldn’t pass thru physical barriers----she wasn’t able to do time travel. Mary did not have any superhuman powers. What Mary did have was a free will. And she had the willingness, generosity of heart, courage, and deep trust in God to say “Yes” to what was being asked of her, even as everything inside of her might have told her to say “No”. And because she said “Yes” with all her heart, God was able to make the humanly “impossible” possible.

On Wednesday of this week, a number of our priests and deacons participated in a virtual Afternoon of Prayer and Reflection, led by one of the priests of the Diocese of Lansing, on the topic: “On the need for us to be inspired so that we, in turn, can inspire others”. It was great to spend some quality time in prayer and reflection, even if it was a virtual gathering. One of the important points Father David raised was that we typically reduce our human senses down to 5: taste, smell, hearing, sight and touch. But he went on to say that psychologists tell us that actually, that list is much larger---that we each have perhaps up to 20 different senses that keep us connected with the world around us, including: pressure, a sense of time, hunger, thirst, danger, and many more.

It made me think further about what we might call our “spiritual senses”, and to what degree do we put those “senses” to use in our own lives. “Prayer”, “meditation”, “contemplation” are all important spiritual senses that help us to be connected to the spiritual world around us. Mary, obviously, was in touch with all those spiritual senses, including the one that St. Luke mentions often, Mary’s ability to “ponder” what all this meant. To ponder means to think about something very carefully, and to try to “see” and understand it in the “big picture”, and how it fits into God’s plan.

That's the only way that Mary could have been prepared for that moment of Encounter with the Divine; it was because of her life of Faith and her deep love for God that had been fostered within her throughout her very young life. She obviously spent quality time in prayer; she spent time pondering God's Word and the teachings of the Prophets. She was one of faithful Jews who had been looking forward to the coming of the Promised One for many generations. And now--- was it really she who was being asked to be the Mother of that long-awaited Messiah, He Who would bring salvation to the world?!

My dear friends, I'd like to point out that there is nothing that Mary did that we too are not able to do. If we want to look for what our responsibility as People of Faith in this world is, and to summarize it in a few words, Jesus gave us a couple different versions of that: that we are "to hear the Word of God and keep it"; and that we should "come to know the Will of God and live according to it"; "we are to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves"; "we are to love one another as Jesus loves us."

I'm sure that most of us here would say that we try to do what is right and good to the very best of our ability. As we live our daily lives, do what is required of us and try to meet our responsibilities, we are doing God's will. But what happens if/when life throws us a "curve"?; what happens when an unplanned family crisis arises, or some unforeseen tragedy comes our way, or some unanticipated illness strikes any of us, or our loved ones? How do we cope with that? Once more, do we take the time to pray for God's help, and to ponder what this all means in the "bigger picture" of God's Plan? In other words, do we say "Yes" to God even in those moments when everything inside us is urging us to turn away from God?

Mary was able to do that, even though she didn't know what was coming; she didn't know what all this meant; she wasn't given the script to this whole Divine Drama that she could read to the last page to know that it all turned out great, and then just played a part along the way. No, not at all. It was only because Mary said "Yes" to God every day in the ordinary and small things, that she was able to find the strength to say "Yes" to this monumental request. And she would continue to say "Yes" to every situation that she would encounter for the next 33 years, up to and including, standing at the Foot of the Cross of her Son dying for the redemption of the world.

We can do that as well. We can't do it on our own, or by our own merits. We need the Grace of God, and the strength of our Faith; we need the power of the Sacraments, and the Nourishment of the Eucharist. And we definitely need to put into practice all the "spiritual senses" that keep us united with the spiritual world, to keep us from getting lost on our Journey of Faith. But with all those "helps" from God, we can----just like Mary---say "Yes" to God, and live our lives as faithfully as possible, even when our life circumstances throw us "curve balls". We can say "Yes" to forgiving those who hurt us; to love those who betray us; to show compassion to those who are suffering; to be patient with those who are difficult. We can say "Yes" to living a life of virtue; or we can refuse to do so, and give into our human weaknesses.

As Pope Francis said earlier today in Rome: "Mary's answer was no simple, submissive 'Yes'.... Mary actively bound herself to God as a young woman in love, prepared to serve her Lord completely and immediately."

I asked earlier, what if Mary had said "No"? Well thanks be to God, we don't have to wonder. But what happens when WE say "No" to God? What happens when we choose to follow our own will instead of God's will? What happens when we refuse to follow Jesus' example, when we refuse His invitation to follow Him with courage? What happens when we ignore the invitation to live in God's ways? Well, that IS a distinct possibility. God never forces anyone. God will always respect our choices. But, we need to be very aware that there are consequences that saying "No" brings.

Mary is our Model; she is our Mother; she shows us the way to live our lives as People of Faith, as those who move forward with Hope, as members of a Church who choose to live with the Love of Jesus in our hearts. May we find our way through Prayer; may we ponder God's Word and ask His guidance to always see His Will; may we follow Mary's example and, knowing that "*nothing will be impossible for God*", say "Yes" every day.

God bless you, now and always!