

By the time we get to the fourth Sunday of Advent, one week before Christmas, there's something of a convergence between our cultural celebration of Christmas and our religious celebration. We've been waiting and preparing now for a few weeks, and we're almost ready. Oh, for our cultural celebration, we may have cards still to get out, or some shopping to do. And for our religious celebration, we may not yet have found the quiet peace of heart that we know we need, in order to really be focused. We still have one more week, to get to the post office or store. We still have one more week to come for Sacramental Reconciliation on Tuesday or our Advent Reflection series this Wednesday, or simply to set aside time to better prepare our hearts. But probably all of us are at least ready for this preparation and waiting time to be over.

And as always, our fourth Sunday of Advent introduces us to the final Advent figure, a young virgin named of Mary of Nazareth. Today the time of waiting is replaced with a time of wonder; the call to repentance we heard in the words of John last week is replaced with a promise of fulfillment in the words of the angel Gabriel. Today our coming Christmas begins to become real – today we can take real delight and find tender joy at Mary's simple, faithful response to God's call.

In today's reading we see at last the nature of God's strategy with our human race. God's answer to our broken world ... is to come among us; to walk with us, to become one of us, to bridge the gap between heaven and earth by becoming totally, completely human. God comes to us not in God's own grandeur, but in our own form, our own human frailty, becoming a human child of humble birth, an utterly dependent newborn baby, just as all of us once were.

And today we see how it first begins. God places everything in the hands of a simple young Jewish woman, hardly more than a girl, really. One named Mary, from a small village called Nazareth, in the hill country of Galilee.

Most probably Mary already had plans for her future. She was engaged to Joseph, and must have believed that they would marry, raise a family, and do their best to follow the Mosaic Law, as had their ancestors in faith for many generations. But then, literally in one moment, Mary's whole life changed. Without a warning, Mary was asked to make a life-changing decision. And though she could hardly have understood all that the angel's invitation and her acceptance would mean – and some of those things were frightening, and terrible -- Mary had the faith and trust to respond without hesitation, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it happen as you say." Mary did not question her worthiness; she didn't challenge the invitation of the angel. She didn't ask to know the details or examine all the fine print. Her faith was so simple and so direct that she just went forward from there, regardless of any uncertainties that she might have felt. It was just right for her to trust God, to be open to God, to believe that whatever was going to happen after that would just work out.

I keep using that word “simple” about Mary’s faith, but I should really use the word *profound*. And not only is it profound, it’s also so very wonderful! Because Mary was open to God, it meant that everything human became open to God through Mary; for through her son Jesus, there is no forgotten place that God does not enter, to bring love and light, healing and forgiveness. Jesus heals the sick, lifts up the poor, forgives those broken in life, brings the outcast back into the community. And Jesus shows us how to live a life totally open to God, and shows us how to love with God’s love, so that his healing, uplifting, forgiving presence can continue through us today.

And God let all this begin with Mary’s simply profound Yes. And because of that yes, there is also so much joy. You see it immediately in the scriptures, as Mary leaves Nazareth at once to visit Elizabeth, and when they each share their news, Mary bursts forth in song “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior” and the two of them dance together for joy. Well, it doesn’t say in the scriptures that they danced ... but they must have.

You know, the real kicker in this gospel is that God’s strategy is pretty much the same with the human race today. God still calls to the world. God calls to each one of us. We all know this; we have all heard the sound of God’s voice, and it’s not usually an overpowering, commanding voice, but a small whisper that leaves it up to us. Sometimes we get too busy to listen -- I know, I get that way too. Sometimes we’re afraid of what it might mean; sometimes we just don’t feel worthy of what it might mean; sometimes we feel we need to know all the details before we can let go and answer the call. I know, because I have felt all those things too.

But God’s still there, calling; God still depends on a Yes from us. Is God pointing you to service to the poor, or a ministry in the Church, or to make a generous financial contribution to the work of the Kingdom? Is God calling you to stand up against injustice on an issue that will be costly for you? There are countless daily yeses that God looks for, and there are life-changing yeses too. They are unique to who we are, and they can come at any moment. The fact is that our all-powerful God won’t overpower us; God waits for our “Yes.” And in this way, God depends on us – and on our care, our nurturing, our teaching – our love for one another, our love for those who are most vulnerable and weak. God depended on Mary to give birth to Jesus – and Jesus depends on us now to become his hands and heart.

Be aware -- your “yes” will cost you. You might have to trade in some or all of your smaller plans for the great plan God dreams for you. But I can tell you, and so could Mary, that trade is a good deal indeed. And it will bring you *much joy*.

Deacon Denny Duffell  
December 18, 2011