

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. Not much is truly known about Mary. We do not have an age for her (or Joseph for that matter). We do not really know what her background, her life, her own sense of self was. We can infer quite a bit, we can make some educated guesses, but ultimately we do not know much for sure about Mary. But, one thing we can be sure of, based on this and every Gospel telling of the story of Jesus' birth, is the depth of faith that Mary possessed. Mary responds to all that Gabriel has to tell her with a simple phrase, "Here am I; the servant of the Lord." that's not to say that she isn't taken aback a little at first, but in her depth of faith Mary still accepts all that she hears from Gabriel and offers herself as the servant of the Lord.

And Mary is encouraged in doing so. In the proclamations of Gabriel, continually and without fail, it is made clear that God will be with her, is with her. "The Lord is with you...you have found favor with God...nothing will be impossible with God." It is this promise of God's presence in and with her, the promise that God's presence can do all, that encourages Mary, that reinforces what she knows in her faith to be true, leads her to accept this call from God, to bring God's only son into this world on a message shared to her by an angelic being. Mary responds to Gabriel in kind, saying "let it be with me according to your word," for with Mary, God has found a vessel of deep faith, a vessel that knows in her faith that God would not ask this if it were an impossible task, and surely if nothing will be impossible with God, then this act of service before God can, will, also be accomplished.

And how could it not be accomplished. Gabriel tells Mary that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...” With the Holy Spirit, with the power of the Most High, Mary will conceive this child, Mary will birth this child, Mary will raise this child, and encourage this child to one day live into the innateness of his being and become the savior of the world. It is in Mary’s commitment, a clear sign of her faith, that Mary exemplifies the trust that she has in God, trust and faith which in turn gives her the power to rise to this call and be this vessel. All of this, because God is with her. Mary gives all of herself to God, quite literally, because of the faith that she has in God and the knowledge that with God, she can answer this call and be the mother of the Son of God.

Now, today, as we make our finishing touches for the arrival of Christ, making sure every last package has arrived from amazon, that the tamales for Christmas eve have been picked up, that the prime rib has been sitting with its dry rub for the past few days, that everyone is safely traversing the roads and the skies arriving safely on time, that the stockings are hung with care and the attack plan for assembling of very complicated children’s toys is set, we ask ourselves on this final day of Advent, what are we called to do now that Christ is practically here? How are we to take on the immensity of the call we have to love our neighbors as ourself, to live into our baptismal covenant to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? How will we accomplish this monumental task that is the call of our faith?

We will do it with God.

We are not called to be the literal vessel of God, to bring our savior into this world through carrying the unborn child for nine months, through birthing him in less than stellar conditions. Only Mary was asked to do this. And, she did it. She did it with faith. She knew that the task before her was on a level and magnitude that had not been asked before, and yet in her faith, in the the knowledge that God would be with her, she bore the Christ child. Our call is not to literally bear the Christ child, but we are called to bear Christ with us in order to reflect Christ to the world. And, we can do this through our faith, in the knowledge that God, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, is always with us. It is this ever-present nature of God that we must hold onto, that we must put our trust in, for it is in this ever-present nature that we can draw on the power of God to accomplish our task, our living into faith, our call to seek and serve Christ in all persons, fighting for justice and peace among all people.

This is not a new message that we hear today. It is a foundational message of our faith. This is why this message is reiterated and reinforced in the example of Mary. God has always been with us from the very beginning of creation, literally breathing life into us. Every time we have faltered hard enough, God has intervened and been with us once more. Ultimately, God sent his only Son Christ to be with us in creation, sharing our experience of creation. And when that creation rose up and killed his Son, God has remained with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and in the scriptures and traditions that we pass down from age to age, in the example we have in Mary, a person who is regarded in Islam (an entirely separate faith tradition mind you) as the only person to ever fully live into faith by completely giving herself over to God. So, it makes sense that this message of God with us is

reinforced again (and again) in the story of Mary's acceptance of her call to bear this special child, to trust in her faith that with God nothing is impossible.

It is our responsibility as Christians today to hold onto this reality and truly live into it in our lives. There can be no excuse for our failures to live into our call to serve, to strive, to seek, to love, if we truly believe God is with us. There can be no excuse for sitting high up on a hill and never reaching down to help those cast down low in the valley. If we are people of faith then we must know that with God nothing is impossible, and with God we can accomplish the call that we have as Christians, that we can truly change the ways of this world. We simply have to know, deeply know, that our faith will carry us, empower and strengthen us, will make the impossible, possible.

Tomorrow we will celebrate Christ's arrival in this world. Let it serve as a reminder that even though this event happened 2000 years ago, Christ is still with us, the Holy Spirit still fills us, that God is always with us. Let the example of the deep faith of Mary, someone who was not necessarily any more special than anyone else in her time save for the reality that she had such a faith that when she listened to the angel Gabriel her only question was about how that could happen since she was still a virgin. She had no objection to the whole Son of God part, she was just curious about the logistics of it all. Let her example guide you in knowing that with God nothing is impossible, and with that knowledge we can and must live into the faith and call that we have as Christians, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Amen.