

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 21, 2011 - Homily
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38
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It's that time of year when all the classic Christmas movies start to pop up on the networks. One of my personal favorites is *A Christmas Story*, based on Jean Shepherd's book *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*. The story is told from a child's perspective, and is full of great one-liners. One of the funniest scenes is the frozen flagpole in the playground, and the dare. The challenge to lick the flagpole quickly escalates into double dog dare, and then the "*coup de grâce* of dares used by kids", the fabled triple dog dare that no kid can refuse. The result is, of course, a call to the fire department for a tongue rescue!

Today's Gospel story is also a classic. The story of the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary to announce God's will for her is so beautiful that it takes our breath away. Mary is greeted as the favored one. She is called by God to the awesome responsibility of bearing the Christ child, the Son of God. Mary's cautious maturity is remarkable, considering the likelihood of her young age – anything from ten or eleven, to twelve or thirteen. Mary is also at the opposite end of the spectrum from her cousin Elizabeth, who is already pregnant by the time the Angel comes to Mary, but who's pregnancy is also a miracle since she is already past her childbearing years. The whole story is imbued with mystery, and overflowing with blessings and miracles.

Sometimes we forget that we don't have to be at the center of a big city, or the center of community life to be noticed by God. We too are held in God's favor. In fact, like Mary, we're here in our own small part of the world, and yet there are miracles of God's grace and favor happening to us, and all around us every day. Everything from miracles of healing, to miracles of God's perfect timing, and God's abundant grace. In that respect, part of our eager expectation for the coming of Christ is to open ourselves up, and be attentive to the miraculous and the unexpected, the surprising and the unimaginable gifts of God.

Mary's first response to the Gabriel's greeting is to ponder what sort of greeting this might be. Having bought herself a little time to consider the angel's proposal with a few questions of her own, Mary says yes. She says yes, even though she must have known what kind of personal sacrifice and ridicule, even danger, she would be in when her pregnancy became obvious to everyone in town. Yet, above all, Mary desires God's will to come to fruition in and through her. Putting aside any concern for herself, she puts God's will above all else in her very young life. There is nothing forced about her decision. The Holy Spirit does not overshadow Mary without her permission. As *Theotokos*, or God-bearer, Mary becomes a co-creator with God in bringing life to the world in more than the most obvious way. Many speak of Mary as an exemplar of how we all are integrally included in the work of God. That is, how we are all invited to participate willingly, joyfully, and with thanksgiving in serving God in Christ Jesus, and in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

To accept the invitation from God, Mary, you and I must understand our dependence on God alone, and how utterly incapable we are, in and of ourselves, to fulfill God's will alone. Mary's willingness – our willingness – to open ourselves up to hearing and accepting God's will for our lives, significantly broadens the possibilities for growing God's kingdom here on earth. Mary was always free, just as we are, to offer ourselves as servants of the Lord. This glorious story of God's miraculous and very intimate intervention into the life of Mary, and the life of the whole world, also

invites each of us to ponder who we are, and what we do in relation to God and God's work. What theologians call the scandalous particularity of God's coming to a particular person, in a particular place, at a particular time in earth's history, tells us just how intimately God desires to be a part of our lives, everywhere, in everything, and at all times. It is truly challenging for us to be as open and willing as Mary was to set self aside, as well as want we want, and to let God lead us and guide into the fullness and abundance of the life He desires for each of us. Dare we let go of control? Dare we see, hear, and experience for ourselves, the unimaginable freedom and blessing of God? Are there parts of our lives that we keep under a tight leash, or behind a locked door? Perhaps God is inviting us to finally let go of the leash, or to open that door. Perhaps now is the time to invite the Light of Christ to transform those aspects of our lives, to heal our memories or our dis-ease, to comfort us in our pain, or to use a hidden gift for God's greater purpose in our lives.

Perhaps we have become accustomed to hesitating or holding back in fear. God's coming to us can seem like an unwelcome intrusion, or even an overshadowing of our personality, especially when we realize that we're being caught up in something so much greater than ourselves. Yet, when we are willing to offer ourselves as God's servants, we become acutely aware of just how much God loves each of us, how beloved we really are, and how God empowers us to bear all things in His name. It is scary to walk forward into the unknown, and out of our comfort zones. It is hard to feel the stirring of the Holy Spirit that makes us discontent with everything else that's going on in the world around us, until we find peace in God's will. It takes a lot of courage to embrace the mystery that overshadows us, and to come so close to the holiness that is God in Christ Jesus.

Nonetheless, we too still have time to experience for ourselves Mary's own question, "How can this be?" God's plan continues to unfold for each of us personally, and for this community of faith. Always remember, "Nothing will be impossible with God." And so, as we complete our Advent journey, we too are invited by God to say the words Mary said. Dare we say it? Dare we invite God's will to be done in our own lives, as Mary did? Dare we speak aloud the words of invitation that will draw us into a deeper relationship with God, who is that great and unfathomable mystery of all creation? Dare we join with God in being co-creators of His kingdom? God's gracious miracles happen every day. We too are blessed by God. So I dare us all to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.