

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

Just as the lighting of the rose-colored candle last week reminded us that we were past the halfway point of Advent, the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary lets us know that Christmas is only a few days away. Like the story of the baby's birth that we'll soon hear, we can easily share with others the story of the Annunciation that we've heard this morning from Luke's Gospel. Our observance of Advent would be incomplete without it because Mary is so important to our celebration of Christmas and in the life of our Lord.

Those of you who attend the adult Bible study on Sunday mornings have been comparing the beginnings of the three synoptic Gospels, specifically how they introduce us to Christ. Mark, whose Gospel is alleged to be the oldest of the three, goes directly to Jesus' baptism. Matthew begins with the genealogy, then gives us an abbreviated version of the birth story. Only Luke gives us the details that have become so important to us. Through his telling of the birth story, Luke reminds us that our savior was not only divine, but also fully human, and so our hearts are touched by the poignancy of the details he shares with us.

Today we marvel at the grace and courage of Mary, who said "yes" to God's plan, and because of what Luke tells us, we often think of her primarily as the young, unwed mother of our Lord. Some branches of Christianity revere her as the Mother of God, as *Theotokos*, a Greek word which means God-bearer. Others see her as a mediator, an intercessor for their prayers. Paintings and icons of Mary almost always depict her as pious and somewhat sad, reminding us that those who have painted her are considering her not only as a young mother, but as one who saw the very worst things happen to her adult son. We easily forget her song, her Magnificat, which points directly to the future life and ministry of our Lord. In those words is a clear message: she was a willing player in God's plan to make things right in the world. She is calling us to join with her, not only in proclaiming "the greatness of the Lord," but also to work for justice and peace for all of God's people. God knows we need to be doing that right now. But just as importantly, she is reminding us that she did things God's way, not her own way. Perhaps we needed to witness her acceptance to recognize that God knew what God was doing and her call was to be obedient to whatever was asked of her.

Mary's story is so different from the story we hear today about King David. David had reached that point in his life when he could sit back, look at his accomplishments, and appreciate his own successes. From his humble beginnings as a shepherd boy, he had slain the giant and become the warrior prince and king—favored in the sight of God, from all indications. He had control over all of Israel and Judah, had captured Jerusalem, making it the City of David. God gave him peace and rest and David settled into a luxurious house built of cedar. What else was there to be done by him? Apparently David was bored, restless, with nothing but his thoughts to keep him busy, and one day he came up with a brilliant idea—to build a house for God! It was time to give the Ark of God a place of honor and respect that would never be found in that tent that was constantly moving from one place to another, in the same way that God's people were constantly moving from one place to another.

So David shared his idea with the Prophet Nathan. Nathan didn't hesitate to say, "Great idea. God is with you—go ahead and do it." We soon learn that God wasn't too keen on the idea, and he tells Nathan exactly what to say to David. It's a real dressing-down, which would surely catch David off-guard. He was not perfect, but we can hope his intentions were good. He honestly seems to want to honor God, to give a sense of God's permanence in his life and the life of those he ruled—a permanence that is not unlike what we have sought through the building of our churches. In them we have built for ourselves places where we can always find God when we visit them. Perhaps

David was seeking something similar, not only as a way to honor God, but as a way to show the importance of God as a permanent influence in his life and in the lives of those he ruled. Yet God clearly does not want to be tucked away in a building, even if it is a fine and beautiful building.

In a few weeks my son will be coming to visit and we're planning to spend some time making decisions about the furniture and other "stuff" that has been passed down through the years as members of my family have died. As the oldest of my generation, I've become the keeper of these things, and that was intentional because I wanted to honor those who considered them important. I won't bore you with an inventory, but I'll tell you that in addition to the furniture, there are dishes and knick-knacks, and jewelry that is much more valuable sentimentally than it is financially. Except for the furniture, all of it is put away for safekeeping. There's something about putting it away physically that has also enabled me to put it away mentally. It isn't doing me any good, it doesn't impact my life, and now I'm beginning to see this stuff as a bit of a burden. In the back of my mind I know it's there, but I rarely look at it, and I don't think about it very often. Letting these things go—into the hands of others who will enjoy them—might be a better way to honor my family.

We can use a similar reasoning to think about David's wish to build a house for God. Would God's people be better off having a place to go to find God when they *wanted* to find God? What would have happened to them if they were only able to see God in God's house and not wherever they happened to be? We might answer that question by looking around us, here and everywhere else in the world where people have built houses for God, and remembering that God cannot, will not, be confined to one place.

The contrast between David's plans to build a house to hold God and Mary's agreement to be *Theotokos*, the bearer of God, offers us a lesson about how God desires to be present in our lives. Remember the words from the first chapter of John's Gospel, which we'll hear on Christmas Day: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our savior and anticipate his second coming, we might ask ourselves where *we* keep God in our lives. Is God safe and secure in a house built for God or are we, like Mary, carrying God with us as an offering, a gift to give to the world? Do we, like David, presume to know what will please God? Or are we, like Mary, willing to be obedient to whatever God asks of us?

Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us—that we may be like you. *Amen.*