

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

Last week I was channel surfing and was happy to see the first of a three-part series on the Discovery Channel on the Life of Jesus, glad that someone in entertainment land remembered the reasons for the season! On other channels there were ample opportunities to watch Christmas movie classics like “Miracle on 34th Street,” and “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Social media is also celebration, with videos of holiday music performed by musicians both well-known and unknown, shared by so many folks they’ve gone “viral,” giving us a break, thankfully, from the political rhetoric that has taken over the world. Yesterday, as I walked across the street to retrieve something from my office, I looked up the hill at the Cloister House and saw poinsettias waiting for us to place them in the church later today. This morning the fourth candle on our Advent Wreath has been lit, leaving only the white candle in the center to remind us that Christmas is almost here. The signs surround us! In just five days, we’ll be singing Silent Night as we carry our candles into the darkness to share the light of Christ with the world.

But today I want to talk with you about teenagers. Yes, you heard me correctly, teenagers. Today at St. Francis we have several opportunities to recognize the teenagers among us. As they do on most Sundays, it’s our teenagers who serve as acolytes, performing their duties with commitment and poise, so intensely that I often want to poke ‘em to see if I can get a smile out of them! They will be key to our greening of the church, both because they are agile enough to get to the spaces that scare the rest of us, and because many of them have done this on the last Sunday of Advent for all of their lives! Our young people don’t hesitate to invite their friends to church and once their guests are here, they are welcomed into the group as if they’ve always been part of it. Today, our EPIC youth will visit homebound members to share Christ’s love with them in this holy season. Today we also welcome members of the Diocesan Youth Council, including two of our own, who will worship with us at our 10:30 service and join us for lunch before they break away for a meeting in our Commons Room. These teenagers have a lot to teach us about faith in action and are a reminder that when we say children and young people are the future of the church, we’re just flat wrong. They are the church now, and we must never take them for granted.

Also with us today is the teenager who captures our attention in the words of Luke’s Gospel. We always hear something about Mary on the fourth Sunday of Advent, whether it’s through the genealogy of her family or the account of Gabriel’s visit to tell her she would bear a child or the story we’ve just heard of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, her much older relative whose own child is also an important part of our Advent remembrances. Mary’s story prepares us for the coming of Christ by opening our hearts and imaginations as she experiences what no other woman, young or old, will ever experience in the same way. Throughout her story, we can see Mary in our mind’s eye, as she hears Gabriel’s news, as we think about how Joseph reacts to Gabriel’s news about her, as she flees in haste to the Judean town in the hill country to see Elizabeth. Was she seeking comfort from Elizabeth? Did she want to share her joy? We like to speculate, don’t we? But we can’t really know what this teenaged girl thought or felt, except through the words of the Magnificat that have been passed down through thousands of years to teach us the lesson only Mary could teach us.

Listen to those words through a contemporary translation by Joy Cowley:

My soul sings in gratitude.
I’m dancing in the mystery of God.
The light of the Holy One is within me and I am blessed, so truly blessed.
This goes deeper than human thinking.
I am filled with awe at Love whose only condition is to be received.

The gift is not for the proud, for they have no room for it.
The strong and self-sufficient ones don't have this awareness.
But those who know their emptiness can rejoice in Love's fullness.
It's the Love that we are made for, the reason for our being.
It fills our inmost heart space and brings to birth in us, the Holy One.

Regardless of how the words are translated, it's obvious Mary knows the world needs a Savior. In the first part of that Discovery Channel series, she was depicted walking through the streets of her village, obviously pregnant, openly ridiculed by local women who passed judgment on her through their gossip and pointing fingers as she passed them. What little we do know about Mary before the annunciation reminds us that she came from a poor family without the status of power, and her "condition" was likely to bring much shame to those who loved her. It was not an ideal situation by any stretch of our imaginations.

From our tainted and tarnished twenty-first century perspective, we might wonder whether Mary was able to rejoice in God's plan for her *after* the reality of her situation set in. One of the many Christmas songs I've heard in the past week is "Mary Did You Know?" recorded by more artists than I can count since it was written in the early 1990s. It's a beautiful song that reminds us of the life and ministry of our Lord Christ as he fulfilled the prophecies we hear today in his mother's words. When we pay close attention to Mary's words, we can probably agree that on some level Mary knew. She knew that the child she bore was sent by God to recreate the balance and peace on earth that God always intended. She was called by God to play a unique role in God's plan and she responded with joy. Would we respond in the same way?

Luke doesn't put any qualifiers on Mary's joy, and so her words become a timeless lesson for us, something for us to think about when the situations and circumstances of our own lives become challenging and there seems to be no way out of them. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, college professor and well-known author, puts it this way: "You can decide to take part in a plan you did not choose, doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you don't entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body."

That's exactly what God called Mary to do, to smuggle God into the world inside her own body. Mary, bearer of the incarnate God, rejoiced with gratitude, saying yes to the thrilling and dangerous scheme that had no script and no guarantees. Through Mary, God, invites us to do the same: to smuggle God into the world in our own bodies, in our own time, despite the risks and dangers and inconveniences that might create for us.

Now, back to the teenagers. Today, as we approach the celebration of our Lord's birth, I invite you to follow their example. Invite your friends to worship with us. Welcome our guests and visitors in a way that makes them feel they've always been part of our body of faith. Take the light of Christ to folks who are homebound or lonely in this season. Decorate your life, not just with poinsettias and greenery, but with the joy of the season so that everyone you meet will see Christ in you. Say yes to the opportunities God puts before you, and as you say yes, sing in gratitude and dance to the music of God's mystery. On Christmas Eve and every other time you come to worship, proclaim the greatness of the Lord. And as you go into the world, remember that you, like Mary, are the bearer of the living God. *Amen.*