

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2023

This evening we find ourselves on the threshold of Christmas just one day to go. And the fact that you are here speaks volumes. After all, many people skip the Fourth Sunday of Advent when Christmas is the following day or the following evening. Yet, you didn't choose to do that. That tells me that you've taken Advent seriously, that it means something to you, that you want this sacred time to matter. It tells me that you truly want to be "ready", want to experience whatever it is God wants you to experience.

This evening we will try our best to imagine that first noel, the birth of Jesus in a manger over two thousand years ago. Of course, it is fitting to celebrate his birth and rejoice in it, for we do the same for each other, each and every year, each time our birthdays roll around. Parties and gifts and food and games and travel and surprises and all sorts of things help us know what a special day it is. And if it makes sense to celebrate the day each of us came into the world, it is surely appropriate to celebrate the day Jesus came into the world.

But that's not the day.

That's not the day, is it? The actual moment Jesus came into the world came long before that, he came the moment the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and made possible a miracle of the highest order - the Eternal Word becoming flesh, that point in history when God visited his people in the most intimate way possible. Jesus first became one of us, not in a manger, but the moment Mary said "yes" - a profoundly holy moment depicted in the Gospel passage we just heard.

In other words, the birth of Jesus would not have happened without this sacred moment, or rather, without this sacred period when Mary carried God within her, cared for the God within her, and loved the God within her.

It's a beautiful paradigm if you think about it. That God first came alive in Mary on the inside and then was born into the world, a birth that changed absolutely everything. First an in-dwelling and then a birth; first an interior transformation and then an external one; first a "yes" and then something and someone who changed the world.

Am I still talking about Mary?

As you might have heard before, what we are about to celebrate tomorrow is not Jesus' birthday. Rather, it's the birth of Jesus - the birth of Jesus into the world, into our human experience, and into our hearts. And the purpose of this "scheduled remembering" each and every year on Christmas is not so we can simply admire this "event" from afar no matter how profound that "event" might be. Rather it is to also recognize the promise it offers each of us - a promise that we too, through the Holy Spirit can give birth to Jesus in new ways in this time and place, through love and mercy and humility and generosity and compassion, to every person and in every circumstance. Each year we are a new person, in new circumstances, and at a different point on our journey, which means that each year we can find new ways to give birth to God in a world desperately in need of every good thing he provides.

But this will not happen if we don't first do what Mary did, it won't happen if we don't first open our hearts and minds and souls to God's grace, allowing God to come alive within each of us, growing to a point where we are able to share him with others, give birth to him so that the people around us can experience him through us.

It starts with a "yes" and ends with a world changed forever by a God for which nothing is impossible. That is what is at the heart of a Christian life, a life lived in the light of the truth that our God isn't "out there" somewhere, but rather chooses to dwell within each person - each person who believes it is possible, and who wants it to happen.

And if that sounds a little bit scary, that's okay. Mary was afraid at what the angel told her. And if it sounds a little confusing or hard to wrap your minds around, that too is okay. And if you can't believe that God would choose you, or be able to do anything worthwhile through you, or want you to play a part in the transformation of the world, all of that is okay too. When we feel that way, we are in very good company.

But we can't stay in that place, we can't stay speechless in the presence of the angel, we can't keep on looking for reasons as to why it can't be so. We just need to find a way to say "yes" – a sincere and a faith-filled "yes" - trusting that from that moment something wonderful will come forth from us, something wonderful that will help make the world a little closer to the way God wants it to be, created it to be, and died for it to be.

**“And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived
a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who
was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God.”**

If we feel it's too late, God doesn't. If we feel we've said "no" too many times before, God isn't concerned with the past, but only with who we are today. And if you feel that you have too many weaknesses or too many faults, God assures us that he can work with anyone and through anyone even you and me.

My dear friends in Christ, the world is waiting for something wonderful to happen. The people around you are waiting for something wonderful to happen.

May our "yes" to God today assure us that that day is coming.