

This is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas is just around the corner. The Gospel reading for this Sunday tells of the Annunciation; that is, it tells about Joseph, and certainly by implication, Mary, finding out that Mary would be giving birth to the long-expected Messiah. This, of course, sets the stage for the Christmas story, the coming of God's Son into this world as the Incarnate Word of God. It is, for many, the favorite of all Bible stories.

Today's Gospel is Matthew's account of the Annunciation. An angel visits the carpenter, Joseph, in a dream, and tells him not to fear taking Mary, his fiancée, as his wife. She's pregnant, but the child, the angel tells Joseph, is of the Holy Spirit and he will be the savior of the world. Matthew is telling us something important. Matthew is telling us that Mary was a very special woman and Joseph was a very special man. They were chosen to be the earthly parents of Jesus. Why? Because they were open to God and they were obedient to God. They were willing to empty themselves of personal desire and to make their wills God's. They put God first, in their hearts and in their minds, and they did so without any self-focused questioning.

So, what can we learn from Mary, and what can we learn from Joseph? What we learn is to be open and obedient to God, when God comes calling. For the past three weeks of Advent, the Church has talked about the coming of Jesus. More than just a remembered moment in history, and a hoped for time in the future, we know that the "Messianic Coming" is very much a thing of the present time, too. Jesus is constantly and continuously coming to us, making himself available to us. He is, if you will, knocking on our door, knocking on the heart's door, asking us to open our hearts to him, so that he might live in us and us in him. The Messianic promise is a thing of the here and now. The holy moments of history, the moment of the Incarnation and the moment of the Resurrection transcend time. These holy moments are moments that exist beyond a chronological instant, and enter the realm of *karios*, God's infinite and ever-present time. The events are forever. Christmas and Easter are forever occurring, forever in the present. Jesus was then, is now and will be, forever, the Messiah. Today, he stands at the door of our hearts and knocks; he pleads, he begs us, to let him enter. Jesus wants us to accept his gift of the Cross, so that he can be our Savior. He wants to give us eternal life.

In Matthew's Gospel, this morning, we learn that Joseph was obedient and faithful in his response to the angelic message. Matthew records that Joseph, upon awakening from his dream, took Mary as his wife. He did not hesitate to do God's will even in a circumstance far beyond his, or anyone else's, understanding. In St. Luke's version of this story, the Annunciation is to Mary, not Joseph. We have two authors; we have two different accounts. It doesn't matter. With Luke, Mary responds to Gabriel, the archangel, when he announces that, in her virginity, she will conceive and bear God's Son, "Let it be to me, according to your word." Joseph, though not in these words, says the same thing. He takes God at his word and does as he is asked.

The teaching point is this: When God knocks at the door, the appropriate response is, "Yes, Lord. Let it be to me exactly as you say." When God knocks at our door, as he does each and every day of our lives, he is offering us the very same grace of his presence. He is asking to live in us and live through us. He is asking us to be his disciples and to make him present in the world.

God's requests of us are unique to us, because for each of us God has some task, some special need, and some desire that we help him in the building of his Kingdom. If we were not the perfect choice, then God would choose another. God has given us free will, which means that we have the ability to say, "No!" But is saying "No" to God something that we ought to do? Is saying, "No" the mark of discipleship? Is saying, "No" to God the same as saying "God, I love you with all my heart, and with all my soul and with my entire mind," as Jesus has taught us we should love you? Can saying "No" to God ever be our best option, regardless of our limited ability to understand either the request or the need? It cannot be the best for us, if we believe that all God has ever wanted of us is for us to know him and love him as he knows and loves us. Saying "No" is certainly not best for us if we believe that God only wants what is good and what is right.

Let our responses to God always be as those of Joseph and of Mary. "Come Lord Jesus; let it be to me according to your word." *Amen.*