

**Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.**  
*AMEN.*

Today's Gospel is both familiar and favorite. While it exhibits each of Luke's characteristic three themes, I think I care about it more, both for its narrative and its prophetic promise for Mary and for each of us. Hear this story in each of these three ways, Luke's themes, the narrative itself, and the promise it holds.

Luke's principle characteristics include more mention of women proportionally, and more stories about women, than do the other Gospels. For example Luke mentions Mary by name 11 times in this section, while Matthew calls her by name, in the comparable section, 3 times. Matthew's account both in terms of narrative and language is more about Joseph than Mary, and women do appear more throughout Luke by name and in stories. Second, Luke is a major champion of the marginalized. He refers to Elizabeth as barren, and he often points out and defends those marginalized in that society. Elizabeth is not a usual kind of marginalized person, but as a barren woman, she was at risk in those times, especially if her husband predeceased her—but God rewards her, as Luke indicates God will defend other marginalized people. Third, Luke's account reports on the work of the Holy Spirit more than appears in the other narrative Gospels. God's action to or with Mary is by the Holy Spirit, not by the Father, the Holy One, the Creator, or the Lord who sets this action into motion. The Lord acts through the Holy Spirit, and Mary found the answer to her sound, human, question "How can this be?" to be acceptable and persuasive. These three distinct

features of a Lucan narrative are all there in this familiar story, (more or less,) but that's not what gets us about this narrative, is it?

Then there's the narrative itself. It is memorable, real sounding, and amazing in another way. Again there are echoes of earlier biblical stories, which we can trace and name, but in fact that's what every good writer has always done: cribbed, echoed, used, repeated, reshaped good story elements, details, and energy. An angel, a specific angel, Gabriel the messenger, is sent to a particular place, at a particular time. How are we not engaged right then? We know the time and place, but the girl is ordinary enough to follow along with, as though she is like us. The angel speaks to her in a regular way, and then names her as favored. Why is this girl different from all other girls? She responded in a regular and responsible way. She had listened and she thought about what kind of greeting this was. She didn't think she was "full of grace" or "favored"—or not—but it surely was an odd way to be greeted by a total stranger. Then the angel tells her a peculiar story of what will happen to her, including a divine, chaste pregnancy, a son, his name, that he will save his people, and that his kingdom will never end. Her reply demonstrates her common sense and her courage. "How can this be?" It's a fine question, and one we would each hope we'd ask. She is hedging her bets between: is she crazy and seeing visions, and — turning down the Lord's amazingly wonderful invitation. How can this be?

The angel tells her just what will happen. She doesn't quibble, and ask the myriad questions, she and we've been asking for two millennia. There are enough factual anchors

that the one larger-than-life detail slips in— and she says, "Let it be to me according to your word." It might be considered an amazing reply, but it might be considered a fantastic, crazy, or unreasoned reply. In this story, it sounds fine. It sounds right to reply politely and affirmatively to an angel. We are told it is an angel coming to her, so presumably she understands Gabriel to be an angel. All the other questions, which might come to Mary or us, are not addressed. Instead an angel comes to a girl, asks her a question, gets a reasonable question in return, gives a bold answer, and we are all informed, and understand as much as is possible for such a mystery. The narrative is told briskly and in seemingly simple, narrative reporting. Everything sounds real, though some of it is puzzling when we step back for a minute. It was the "sixth month" and Elizabeth was in her "sixth month." Those are factual anchors, but it's not exactly clear what the first sixth month is, but it sounds factual, and real, and narrative. That works out for Mary's baby to be at about the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, in June, and so being he'd be born around December, and that works out for us, but it doesn't necessarily fit with information from that time, but it works out fine in the story. The story "hears" clearly and we understand all of it but the heart of it. What did Mary hear and why did she agree—and what really, really happened and — how. But leaving that aside, what is this story and Mary's hold on us? Today's collect prays that our conscience may be so purified that the Almighty's Son Jesus Christ when he comes, may find **in us** a mansion fit for himself. Mary was just a girl who loved her Lord, living in a fairly isolated place, who heard a whacked out request, listened, and

responded from her love, from her heart. We hope not to be Mary, but to be our own authentic selves, so that we could hear the Holy One's call to us, hoping and praying that we'd respond as fully, without reservation.

This year, as in most years, Advent Four is the week for the quarterly Ember Days, those days we pray for those in ministry. The third choice of collect is for "All Christians in their vocation." It says, "Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before you for all members of your holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you—through Jesus Christ." Isn't that similar to the way we observe Mary and what we hope for, for ourselves. Mary is not someone else; Mary is like us. She loved God and she trusted God, and she heard Gabriel's call to her as an authentic call from God, and authentic and possible to her.

Isn't that what we hear in Mary's story? How can we do both? We hear God talking and wonder and chivvy ourselves to sort out whether that is the voice of God, or a projection of ourselves, or another voice altogether, a selfish or wicked voice. I don't know whether we are more doubting than was Mary, but I think it does her no favors to assume she had less imagination and capacity to doubt and analyze than do we. More than figuring out what she heard, how do we engage in doing something God asks of us?

At the CREDO meeting I went to for a week in November, we looked at each of our own lives in the four categories of health, finance, spiritual life, and vocation. We were to plan out three goals for ourselves and the consequences in, to, for, from those categories. We were to name one other thing, if we wanted: a big hairy audacious goal." For each

of us, it represented in some way a heart's desire, which we were afraid to aim for, or doubted would happen, or something else we really cared about but self-limited in trying some way. Years ago, I remember asking a Winsor classmate who goes to the Advent, and who doesn't not believe that women are validly or possibly ordained, "Suppose God called YOU—" She said it wasn't possible. I asked whether she wasn't limiting what God could ask of her, say to her. "No, it isn't possible." Surely what God asked of Mary as at least that impossible, but she loved God, knew herself as a cautious, open, faithful person, so Mary answered from her own security of self to the God she loved." That's what we each hope for, pray for, listen for, and fear hearing. We don't know whether we'd answer God from our faithful loving selves. Jesus is in us, inspiring us, being in us as he was in Mary, incarnated. He promised and promises to be with us. "God with us" is his first title and his promise lasts to us through his life, death, and resurrection, and to us here and now—and that is the news of Advent, the news of Christmas and to all Christians Good News.