

4th Sunday of Advent - December 24, 2017

*"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."*

The reply of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the Angel Gabriel - to God who sent the Archangel to her - is a reply of humble acceptance to an invitation, a vocation, and a mission. "Be it done to me." Let it be so. I accept. And I will do what you ask. Even if I do not fully understand.

Hers is a simple, humble, generous response - full of trust. And love. It is exactly the opposite of the response of another woman made so, so long ago, in another conversation with a different angel . . . a fallen angel. It was this "let it be done to me," this "fiat" from Mary that led teachers in the ancient Church to give her the title "the New Eve." Why? Because Eve allowed the fallen angel to seduce her into distrust and suspicion that God's loving plan for her was somehow going to fail her. Mary allowed that she could not wrap her mind around the plan God had for her - and yet she trustingly accepted it anyway. And thus she - the "New Eve" would bring forth into this world a "New Adam," Jesus Christ (see St. Paul's letter to the Romans 5:14-21). Everything changed with that - and the dawn of a New Creation broke in with her humble acceptance of the plan of God. It really did change the world.

Today we look to her and ask for the grace to imitate her example of loving trust. Today, as we draw so near to the day of celebrating the birth of her divine Son, we also are invited to make a gift of ourselves - poor, lowly, perhaps confused and unable to really make sense of so much that is asked of us in the day-to-day challenges of remaining faithful, in a world that often mocks humble and simple and loving trust in God. Of trust in God, and not always being in control ourselves.

As we have been reflecting on a vision for our parish community during these weeks of Advent, we have also been seeking the grace to respond to God's invitation to us. To realize that what God has in store for us is so much more than what our own limited vision can really grasp. Mary had no perfect or complete picture of how that plan would unfold. I don't pretend to have a perfect or complete picture of how everything will unfold for us, either. Mary had only the word of the Angel of God, and her trust that the God who called her would be faithful in all things and at all times, just as He had been faithful in all His promises of the Covenant with His people.

When she said "yes" to God's plan for her life in Nazareth, could she really have known that following that path was going to lead her to Bethlehem about nine months later, where she would deliver her Son in a barn-like cave, using a manger - a beast's feeding trough - for a crib? Could she

really have known that her “yes” to God’s plan in Nazareth would mean one day fleeing to Egypt in haste, while Herod sought to kill her Son, and eventually moving back to Nazareth? Was it really possible for her to foresee three agonizing days of frantic searching in Jerusalem with Joseph, when they thought they had lost Jesus as a 12 year old boy? Can anyone really think that when Mary said “yes,” she had in her mind an image of herself standing at the foot of a cross while her Son suffered His awful death on it? That she would receive His lifeless body at the foot of that cross? Or that she would eventually experience the joy and ultimate victory of her Son’s Resurrection? No, she couldn’t have known all that when she spoke with the Angel Gabriel . . . but she COULD discern what the immediate next step was for her to take. When she said “yes” to God and His plan for her, Mary’s next move was to . . . GO OUT! St. Luke tells us that after her encounter with the Angel Gabriel, she immediately went in haste to the hill country of Judea, to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was advanced in years and also expecting a baby - John the Baptist. Do you understand what this means? Though she could not fully understand everything about God’s plan (really, how could she have?) she was still able to discern what she should do in that moment. She knew what “doing the next right thing” meant, right then and there. She went out. She did not

close in on herself to brood or to hide. She went out - to joyfully share the Gift she received. She went out - to offer assistance to someone in her time of need. She remained with Elizabeth, we're told, for three months - we can safely assume that means she stayed to accompany Elizabeth through the final months of her pregnancy and the delivery, and to help in whatever ways she could. **There is our example.** We have been given so much - and as a parish we, like Mary, are to go out of ourselves. To go out - and joyfully share the Gift we have been given. To go out - and to accompany those in need around us. That is why in our vision for the parish, I say that we are to be:

A parish that is not closed in on itself and self-absorbed, but rather a parish that is constantly searching out, inviting, and welcoming everyone into an encounter with Jesus Christ . . . and life in His Holy Spirit . . .

It is what Mary did - and continues to do. In her case, the practical application was to go to Elizabeth. In her case, "Welcoming everyone into an encounter with Jesus Christ" began with Elizabeth, and John the Baptist who leapt for joy in his mother's womb. She brought them Jesus, literally, in her own womb. Later on, her "welcoming others to an encounter with Christ" was going to include rough, poor, and lowly strangers who seemed to come out of nowhere on her and Joseph at Bethlehem - the shepherds. She would also welcome sophisticated, refined "wise men from the east,"

also known as magicians, or Kings, into an encounter with her Son.

Following Mary's example, I would like to see our parish become, more and more, a place where the conditions are such that the poor, the lowly, the "unsophisticated shepherd types" feel right at home with the "sophisticated wise men types," as we all encounter Christ and are filled with His Holy Spirit. We should be able to welcome them all and make them feel like they truly belong - as Mary did. We, with Jesus Christ living in us, can and must search out, invite, and welcome others to encounter Him. Everything we do, every program, every liturgy, every encounter, every action - both within and outside the walls of our Church buildings - all of it, must be directed to that aim. Pope Francis has famously said on more than one occasion that the Church is not an NGO, not just a charitable nonprofit, not merely a social work organization (though there is an astounding amount of valuable social work that gets done through the Church). No, all that we do in the Church, including our social outreach, is aimed at accomplishing (or supporting) the fundamental purpose of drawing others in, inviting, welcoming, and setting up the conditions in which Jesus Christ may be encountered, experienced, and loved. Nothing else matters. All that we do must be deliberately aimed at fulfilling that purpose. It's what Mary did, and

the impulse to do it began with her “yes” to God’s plan in her life . . . mysterious as it was.

Bishop LaValley recently signed a decree to consolidate our existing two parishes, establishing St. Peter’s Parish to be the one Catholic Parish in Massena and Louisville. We are setting out on a path that has many unknown twists and turns ahead of us. Should we be afraid? Should we be confused? Do we need to fret about how things will turn out? No. Rather, this is a time that we need all the more to look to the “New Eve,” Mary of Nazareth, and ask that she take us by the hand, as we echo her simple and confident “yes.” And then, GO OUT.

Becoming St. Peter’s Parish - taking the name of the very first Catholic Church in the Massena area which dates back to the 1830’s - is only a first step. We have many steps ahead of us, but like Mary, we can trust that God will remain faithful in all things and at all times.

Recall that St. Peter was the leader of the Apostles who kept vigil in that Upper Room of Jerusalem after Christ’s Ascension, waiting and praying, as the Lord had instructed them, for the power from on high to come to them (the Holy Spirit). Mary was with them there, in that upper room (St. Luke tells us so, in the Acts of the Apostles). During those nine days (the Church’s first Novena!), is it at all far-fetched to imagine Peter and the other

Apostles talking to Mary? Asking her questions about her Son? Drawing some encouragement and consolation and reassurance from her presence? Could they have held her hand, and prayed with her? I believe they would have.

Let me suggest that we do this as well - to ask the Blessed Mother to take us by the hand, to encourage us, to pray with us, and to pray for us - that we might follow her example, and truly become

A parish that is not closed in on itself and self-absorbed, but rather a parish that is constantly searching out, inviting, and welcoming everyone into an encounter with Jesus Christ . . . and life in His Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.