

SURPRISED BY GOD: 4TH SUNDAY ADVENT B

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A few days before Christmas a woman received a beautiful string of pearls in the mail. She could only guess who sent the gift. But when she didn't find any message with the present she burst into tears. Three times she turned the packet inside out and upside down. But there was no note, no words, and no message, wrapped up with the gift. What she really wanted was a card that said *'You mean a great deal to me. I love you!'* That message would have meant more to her than the pearls themselves.

By contrast, when Gabriel, God's messenger, greets Mary, the first thing Mary hears are words of love from God: *'Rejoice, Mary! The Lord is with you. God has chosen you. You are special, you are precious, and you are loved.'* God, then, doesn't leave out the important words.

On hearing those words of God's special love for her, Mary can only rejoice. But joy is not her only response. Here she is, a girl about fourteen, living quietly in an out-of-the way village of Galilee, far from the rich and famous and the movers and shakers of this world, and yet hearing those amazing and stunning words from God! *'What is God up to?'* she wonders. The gospel could not be clearer when it says: *'She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what the greeting could mean.'*

The messenger of God reassures her: *'Don't be alarmed! Don't be afraid, Mary! Listen to what I have to say! Of all women on earth, God has chosen you to be the Mother of the Saviour of the World!'* But Mary is a virgin and so she asks the perfectly obvious and reasonable question: *'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?'* The messenger answers: *'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.'*

Mary doesn't ask any more questions. She doesn't need to. She simply responds freely and deliberately to the God of surprises, the God who has picked her out for the greatest mission in the world: *'I am the servant of the Lord,'* she says, *'I say "yes" to God. I accept my part in God's plans. Let what you have said be done to me.'* From that moment Mary conceives the child Jesus in her womb. From that moment *'the Word of God became a human being and dwelt among us'*. St Augustine comments that Mary first conceives her child in her heart and only then does she conceive him in her body. Our Preface today makes the beautiful observation: *'The virgin mother longed for him with love beyond all telling'*, i.e. with indescribable love.

You and I are living in an age when many people find it difficult to make permanent commitments to others, commitments that require life-long love, fidelity, perseverance and endurance. So it's particularly appropriate for us to wonder and marvel today at Mary's total commitment to God, and to all the changes her pregnancy will bring to all her plans for the future. What a striking example she is, then, of living that motto for life, *'Let go and let God.'* She teaches us to put our faith and trust in God at all times, but especially in difficult,

demanding, and seemingly impossible situations. But she also teaches us to be people who bring Christ to others, just as Mary set out immediately to bring him to her elderly cousin, Elizabeth.

During the past year we have become aware of how much darkness there is in our world as well as how much light. In the rituals we have watched on TV for people killed or maimed in particular catastrophes, we have noticed that grieving people always light candles of remembrance. Those small pieces of self-consuming wax and flame say that the light in our world is stronger than the darkness. That is the message too of the lighting of the four candles today of our Advent wreath. Those candles will burn out, but our commitment as his followers to be the light of Christ in the darkness of insensitivity and indifference, ignorance and malice, should never burn out or never be put out.

During the rest of our Eucharist, then, let us renew our commitment to be that Light of Christ that drives out the darkness of evil, and especially for those for whom Christmas is more a time of darkness, sadness, depression and desperation than an experience of light, joy, love and peace. I'm thinking particularly of people who are homeless, separated, bereaved, friendless, or abused. At this time of Advent and Christmas they especially need our commitment to be the light and love of Christ to them. May we, like God, surprise and encourage them with our loving words and loving care!

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