

Dear friends in Christ, grace & peace....

Today's gospel is the conversation between an unusual visitor and a pregnant teenager, and God is in the midst of it all. Mary is not the first young woman to be pregnant without a husband, nor will she be the last. She is naturally afraid and confused. Some of her wonder is described in the novel, Baby Love as it talks about another pregnant teen: "Wanda is thinking about last winter, when she was pregnant. 'Expecting', is how Mrs. Ramsay used to put it. Back when it seemed exciting to step on the scale and find out she'd gained another two pounds. Of course, she loves Melissa more than anything in the world and she wouldn't trade her for any other baby or even change the little red birthmark on her forehead. Of course, having a real baby you can cuddle and wash and put outfits on is better than just imagining. But back in January it was like carrying around this fancy package, looking at it every day, wondering what's inside. As long as you don't open it you can always pretend it might be a diamond ring or the keys to a moped or something. Once you open it, there will always be a million things that won't be inside, even if what's there is what you wanted the most. You've got it. You just aren't expecting anymore, that's all."

Well, Mary is expecting, and wondering, and afraid. She has heard predictions from the messenger about the child she is carrying. She hasn't had much time to think about what this all means, but one thing is sure... she is involved. She bears in her flesh signs of what God has promised. She needs to grow up quickly from a young girl to a woman used by God. We sometimes forget that for Mary there was nine months of waiting. What did she do during those long nights when her back hurt and she couldn't sleep? What were her hopes as she dreamed about the future of this child? In a way the child was already here with her...and yet she needed to wait and wonder and hope for the day of birth. That's the way it is for us also as we wonder and look forward to Christ's coming in our lives...Christ is in us and yet we await the fullness of his promised coming.

Expectation...is at the heart of the Christmas celebration. We expect joy, gifts, company, togetherness, good feelings as Christmas approaches. It all seems to come to a peak on Christmas Eve or morning. And then, by Christmas afternoon, we experience what Peanuts character Charlie Brown calls, "the post-Christmas letdown". Maybe we expect too much of ourselves and others. Women still seem to bear the brunt of the expectations to make Christmas 'merry'. They bake and clean and chauffeur kids to practices and programs. Moms know the burden of trying to make Christmas a perfect holiday.

Getting back to Mary, I wonder what she expected when the angel told her she was expecting. We heard her song of praise in the Psalm reading today...it envisions a whole new world of God's making, in which God's humble servant is noticed, chosen, lifted up and given a great task to do joyfully. And she expected that the whole world would be transformed in these great events.

But we already know what actually happens: The baby is born in a shed or

a cave, in the dark and damp and cold; the angels sing, but no one seems to hear them except a few shepherds out in the hills. Are the rich and powerful toppled?...No; as a matter of fact, the king orders all newborns killed....and this family flees to save the life of their child.

One thing we can learn from Mary is that we do not need to expect Christmas to be perfect. Even the first Christmas unfolded in mysterious and troubling ways. Come to think of it, what Christmas program was ever perfect?...why should our pageants go any more smoothly than the event we're celebrating? God was at the heart of it all, but for Joseph and Mary and Jesus, it was a difficult time.

God is often at work in such hidden ways...Mary comes to know this, and we need to learn this, too. Why should we expect our part in God's work to be any clearer to us than Mary's was to her? The scriptures warn us to get ready for God's coming not by making frantic preparations, but by clearing space, "preparing the way of the Lord." We see this clearly in the dialog of Mary and the angel.

Mary is not asked to arrange for the salvation of the world or to create the perfect setting for Jesus' birth. It is God who has the ideas, God who makes the promises, as farfetched as they may seem. Mary is only asked for her consent: she is asked to place herself in God's hands, and to give God room to work, and to make herself available to do what God is planning. She does not hide her surprise and fear and confusion. She does not hold back her honest questions. She wonders out loud "Why me?" What does God have in mind in asking her to conceive and bear the Savior of the world? And then (miracle of miracles) she says, "YES".

God came into our world as a baby. God's coming into our lives is like a baby's coming; it is never exactly what we expected, and it is certain to involve trouble and complications and hard work...and sometimes, as in Mary's life, having and raising a child involves anguish and pain. Does that mean we reject the messenger of God? No, it means giving God space to work and having faith and hope in what we cannot see.

This advent our calling is not to somehow create the perfect family Christmas out of the chaos of this world. We don't even need to try to create the perfect spiritual moment for ourselves. Our calling is more like Mary's...to wonder what God could possibly have in mind, to create space for God to work in us, and then to say 'Yes' and take what comes.

We may not realize it, but we are very much like Mary sitting there with the angel of God. We are expecting, knowing that God has already begun what he announces to us. Christ lives in us already, even as he once lived within Mary. We will ache and labor, we will wonder about his coming, we will have questions of God, but above all we live in trust and hope, as we say "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

May God be with you in your expectations this Christmas. May God be in the silence as well as the joyful noise. May God be in the questions you ask as well as in the answers you receive. May God's peace which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.