

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

“Holy Mary, mother of God.”

Growing up in the household in which I did, and having attended a church in another denomination in the early years of my life – I have always had a comfortable understanding of Mary’s role in the life of the Christian Church. “Hail Mary” was a prayer that we said constantly in school, and very few of us ever questioned her role in Christian life to be anything other than one that was of holiness and to be revered.

When I began my journey to a new denominational home in my early twenties, I was surprised to find the differences of opinion when it came to the mother of God. Most Protestants whom I met wanted to reduce her role to as little as they could – fearful of elevating her to a place that she didn’t deserve. Many expressed their displeasure with the Roman Catholic practice of praying to her as an intercessor, asking her to look over them and to keep them safe.

But when I encountered Anglicans, it became even more confusing than I originally thought when I learned about our – “via media” – the Anglican “middle way.” In true Anglican fashion, we aren’t exactly sure what to believe when it comes to Mary, and we try to balance ourselves in between. So in truth, most Anglican preachers simply avoid the topic of her all together – ensuring that they won’t get it wrong.

But when it comes to the fourth Sunday in Advent, when we are so close to the birth of Christ, when Mary is the central figure of the gospel, and when God's calling her is on our hearts and our minds, we would be remiss to ignore the great lessons her story has to teach us, and the great wisdom, that in her story, we find.

This past week, while perusing different Facebook pages, I came across a newspaper article about a very provocative advertisement upon a billboard in Auckland, New Zealand. In what appears to be a teenage actor in an after school special, the picture upon the billboard displays a young woman with her hand covering her mouth and a stunned, scared look in her eyes. She holds in her other hand a positive pregnancy test, and is reacting astonished, yet terrified.

The reason I took so much notice of this billboard is because the picture upon it is not a warning for teenage pregnancy, as one might think at first glance, but it is a modern depiction of the Virgin Mary, sponsored by a church in their community taking a serious risk.

The advertisement has caught the attention of the world wide press and has been condemned by all the usual suspects. Many Evangelical leaders have called it a "disgraceful display" and some Roman Catholics have condemned it as a "perversion of the Blessed Virgin." But although the billboard caught me off guard at first, the more I have prayed and thought about it, I actually think it pushes us in a very helpful direction.

We know that Mary was poor. We know that she was yet to be married. We know that women in her culture were mostly invisible,

unless they were about to be condemned. The central figure of today's gospel had every right to be terrified. She had every right to stand up and ask God why he would ask this of her. This would not have been an exciting moment in her life – just as the billboard portrays – for this unexpected pregnancy would have been an impending nightmare, just as it can be for many today.

So when we hear the gospel of the calling for Christ's birth, when we hear the story of Mary's call to birth and mother him, it is important not to romanticize what is actually happening in this scene – to acknowledge that she does not immediately jump for joy, or answer God with an automatic or overwhelming “yes.”

One of the questions clergy often get asked when they begin their ministry with a new community centers around the story of how they first came into their vocation – how they first knew that God was calling them to ordained ministry. For me, it's a story that I usually like to share, as it is a wonderful way to give witness to one's faith, but I often wonder why the only one who is usually expected to share such a story is the ordained Priest.

When we think of conversion experiences or the answering of God's call, we tend to think first of major figures like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus or the apostle Matthew getting up from his tax collecting booth to follow Jesus.

But our Gospel today tells us of a seemingly minor figure, of Mary, an unexpecting teenage girl. She was a poor, young and an inconsequential figure in her community – she was not someone who you would have thought was going to be a great influence on the

world. But God chose the unexpected for a reason; God chose the meek and the lowly so we might come to relate, God chose Mary to birth his Son into this world, calling her to be more than she knew herself to be.

Even though we seem to be perfectly comfortable asking our Christian leaders about how they have been called by God, wanting to be inspired by the events that led up to their answering “yes” to God’s call – we don’t tend to ask each other about our vocational call as Christians do we? How each of us, gathered here today, came to know that God had called *us* to know Jesus, and to make him known in our world.

Yes, I understand, for many of you who were baptized as infants and children, you didn’t have an experience like Saint Paul falling off a horse on the road to Damascus and hearing the voice of God. I suppose converts to the faith might feel better equipped to answer such questions. But each and every one of you comes here to profess Christian faith. Each and every one of you have reasons why you continue on your Christian journey – and whether you frame your answer with the language of “vocation” or not – you have each been chosen and you have each been called by your God.

“Do not be afraid” the angel says to Mary.

It seems like an almost ridiculous statement considering the circumstances. Not a statement that Mary could be expected to believe. Nothing about what she was being asked to do would indicate that she should abdicate her fear. Nothing that was likely ahead of her on her path, should have led her to quell her

uncertainties. She was about to enter a world that would not accept her pregnancy; face a future husband that would have no reason to understand what had happened to her.

It is so important that we do not romanticize this situation – so important that we do not pretend that this was an exciting day in Mary's life. Because when Mary says “yes,” when she gives her will, when she says that she will follow the path that has been laid for her by God, she demonstrates the process of conversion that we all must face, when we say “yes” to our Lord and our God.

Something about our culture wants us to make choosing Jesus seem easy. Something about wanting our church to succeed makes us want to water down the radical nature of Christian faith. Our God does not ask us to follow him because it will give us the warm and fuzzies. Our God does ask us to bring Jesus into the lives of others because it will make us feel good.

Our God calls us to share the experience and the love of our Saviour – so that he might transform the world.

God *has, does and will* ask big things of us, and we do not always want to say “yes.” And so we are reminded by the story of Mary, about the difficult challenges that those who went before us have faced. That being a follower of Jesus, being a member of the household of God is not meant to be the easiest of paths that we can take.

But that when we say “yes”; when we accept Jesus into our lives; when we share our experience of him with another – we are rewarded with Christmas morning; we are rewarded by witnessing

our Saviour being born into another life; we are rewarded by our Lord and our God, as he builds up the Body of Christ.

Thanks be to God.