

**December 21, 2014 – Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**Prepared by Fr. J. Edward Szendrey, MM, China**

Second Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16; Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“Four more shopping days until Christmas!” If we pick up a newspaper or turn on the television today, we may find ourselves confronted with this frantic pronouncement, reminding us that there are only a precious few days left to do all that we have to do in order to prepare for our Christmas celebration. For those who are Christian believers, particularly Catholic Christians, this time of year can seem particularly confounding. We run pillar to post buying the gifts, writing the cards, planning the parties and the menu for Christmas dinner. Yet when we enter our place of worship, the fact that it is sometimes referred to as a sanctuary is all the more poignant. Here, we are invited – by word and worship – only to wait and to wonder.

As we gather this last Sunday of Advent, it is especially important for us to take this hour of worship to – like our Blessed Mother – stop and ponder the mystery that is being set before us. Advent is our time of waiting and longing. As we enter our last week of Advent, it is good for us to take this moment to reflect on our deepest heart longing – our desire to draw near to God – and to take a long look at those things that may keep us from drawing close to the One our hearts desire so much.

One of the most amazing things to ponder from our Gospel today is the realization that the deepest aspirations of every human heart that ever existed, or exists today, once rested upon the response of a teenaged girl from a nowhere town, in a backwater province of the biggest empire in the ancient world. The Gospel that we hear today has been depicted many times throughout the centuries by artists. Most of these depictions are quite romanticized, but we would do well not to get swept up too readily into sentimentality. Because at the heart of this story lies the struggle of a young girl trying to come to terms with the impact it would have on her life to be chosen by God. Certainly, Mary had been prepared for this moment from the time of her conception. Sinless from birth, she remained so, completely open to God. In every way she was full of grace, favored by God and blessed among women. But this did not blind her to the fact that being chosen by God was a funny kind of blessing. Some translations say that she was “perplexed” by the Angel Gabriel’s words; others use the phrase “greatly confused.” I tend to think that the best translation would be “panic stricken.”

Mary knew that if what Gabriel said were to come to pass, it would mean facing the stigma of an illegitimate child; it would mean being ostracized from her community and the loss of all of her aspirations for married life. She was all too aware of the fact that being the mother of the Son of the most High would not mean a life of privilege for her, but rather a life of suffering, which indeed it did: seeing her child becoming a wandering preacher open to all kinds of hardship, hearing words such as “who is my mother...”, and standing at the foot of a cross witnessing the execution of her son. Mary knew enough of the history of the Jewish people to realize that being chosen by God often meant having one’s life turned upside down.

And yet respond she did. She set aside her confusion and panic to instead trust in the Angel's assurance: do not be afraid. Unlike the first Eve, who sought to control her destiny, Mary, the second Eve, abandoned herself to the will of God. She responded, in effect, to the desire of her heart for God, a desire so poignantly articulated in her reply to Gabriel: "let it be with me according to your word." And thus did she set into motion the very action of our salvation.

"Do not be afraid." The words of the Angel are simultaneously compelling in their appeal to our deepest heart wishes, and repelling as they illumine some uncomfortable truths. The frenetic pace of the last days before Christmas is nothing compared to our sometimes frantic attempts to keep at bay all that we fear: the fear of the stranger, the fear of not having enough, the fear of criticism and ridicule to name but a few. The sad irony of this of course is that in our attempts to keep these fears at bay we often wind up keeping God at arm's length. In these last days of waiting and wondering, can we ask what it is that this courageous young woman, this nobody from nowhere, has to teach us? Does she, who would soon be forced to migrate from her home, open our eyes to a deeper understanding of the plight of the immigrants in our midst? Does she, who was poor and homeless, challenge our notions of what it means to have enough, or to give enough? Does she, who fled in the night because of threats of violence from an oppressive government, spur us to risk criticism and ridicule to speak out against injustice? Does she, this nobody who became the mother of our salvation, cause us to look again at those whom we dismiss or to who pay no notice?

"Do not be afraid." Our wait is almost over. And what we find at the end of our waiting will quite possibly turn our lives upside-down. But in summoning the courage to say yes to this blessing that baffles, what we may also find is the One who is the fulfillment of the desires of our, and every human's, heart.

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