

The Fourth Sunday of Advent December 19, 2021

With Christmas only a few days away, many of us are busy preparing for the upcoming holidays. We are buying presents, decorating our homes, buying groceries, and planning ahead to make sure these days are memorable for ourselves and our families. In the process, we are building memories that will last a lifetime. At the same time, we may be feeling overwhelmed and a little worn out.

As a Church family, we have spent these past four weeks preparing for Christmas in a different way. We have not been planning out the details of the holiday itself but have been meditating on the deeper meaning of Christmas. What makes December 25 so special after all? It is not just a time to get together with friends. It is not just a time to sing songs and exchange presents. Rather, it is the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. If not for Jesus Christ, December 25 would just be another day on the calendar like November 25 or January 25. But because God became man in Jesus Christ to fulfill the prophecies foretold long ago, we mark Christmas Day as a reason to be merry.

These four weeks we have reflected on the truth that God wants to live among us. He loves us so much that He wants to be known and loved by us. He wants an intimate friendship with us and wants to share His life with us. It is really not unlike a man who falls in love with a woman and does all He can to make sure she notices him and falls in love with Him too. God went to an extreme length to make this friendship with Him possible. He sent His Son to become one of us. Though He could have been born into wealth and privilege, He chose to live in poverty so that no one would be afraid to approach Him. Even though we rejected that friendship, He was willing to suffer death on a cross to show us just how deep and enduring that love was.

That is the mystery we have been preparing to celebrate these past four weeks - not just some sentimental scene that took place in a stable two thousand years ago but the reality of a God who is present and active among us today.

One of the people who embodies for us the attitude we should have as we look forward to Christmas is Mary. During the nine months of her pregnancy, she had time to reflect on the miracle taking place within her. The message of the angel telling her that God had chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah played over and over again in her mind. She knew the Bible very well and was aware of all the prophecies foretelling the birth of the Savior. We can imagine that she spent time pouring over the books of Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah and all the other prophets looking for ways to understand what it was that God was doing in her life and who this child she was carrying would be.

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She is an example for us during this last week of preparation for Christmas. She invites us to think about what God is doing in our lives. How is God making Himself known to us? In what ways is He being born into our world today? We might not have easy answers. But, like Mary, we should be asking such questions so that we can discover more and more the love and friendship that God wants to have with us. That way it will be a reality in our lives.

Mary is also an example of how we are to live the mystery of Christmas. In today's gospel, Saint Luke tells us that Mary traveled "in haste" to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. To say the least, a lot was going on in Mary's life. Her pregnancy and marriage to Saint Joseph were already a lot to handle. But she didn't sit around worrying about what was going to happen and how she was going to handle it all. Rather, she set out to help her cousin. She put the needs of Elizabeth before her own.

Sometimes we can get bogged down in everything that is going on around us. It can weigh us down so much that we don't know what to do with ourselves. We begin to worry and can even become hopeless. And the holidays just add more stress to an already busy life. When we find ourselves being overburdened with stress and worry that is the time to follow Mary's example and reach out to others. Going to visit friends in a nursing home who may be feeling lonely this time of year or volunteering at a food pantry serving poor families will remind us of all our blessings. When we help others it lifts our spirits unlike anything else we can do. So many of the gifts we give this year will be put away and forgotten. But when we give of ourselves by serving those in need, we give a gift that won't be forgotten and that will have ripple effects throughout the community. So, like Mary, let us look for ways to help others during these Christmas holidays and bring good cheer and light into the lives of the needy.

Another way that Mary embodies the spirit of the Christmas Season is her willingness to share with others what God is doing in her life. Both Elizabeth and Mary were experiencing miracles in their lives. Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist even though she was too old. Mary was pregnant with Jesus even though she was a virgin. And together they sing the praises of God who fulfills His promises.

What would Christmas Day be like if, instead of the usual small talk at dinner, we shared with each other what God has been doing in our lives? What if we simply told our loved ones how they were a blessing to us and what gifts we saw in them? It could very well be that we would see each other in a totally different light. We might be able to forget some of the hurts of the past and see each member of our family as the gift they truly are to us despite their failures and weaknesses. Then Christmas might be a time when we are grateful for all that we have and better able to recognize the God

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who is working in and through us.

Christmas Day is near. But Jesus Christ is always near to us - Christmas Day and every other day of the year. Just as Mary brought Jesus into the world, now He invites each of us to bring Him to everyone we meet. That is the mystery of that first Christmas Day which we renew at every Mass - God wants to live with us. God wants nothing else than to love us and have us love Him in return. By following Mary's example of humble service and joyful witness, we can renew the blessings of that first Christmas Day for our world today.