

Advent 4C 2021

An angel visits Mary and tells her to rejoice.

Maybe I have a suspicious personality, but when someone prefaces something by telling me that everything is fine, I do not anticipate a pleasant surprise.

As expected, the angel follows with news about which no recently betrothed teenager would feel joy.

Mary is pregnant, and not by her fiancé.

This could derail her life.

In fact, the punishment for adultery was officially death by stoning, though it seems that, by her day, it was not usually executed.

Instead, she is more likely to be dismissed in disgrace to live forever as a burden on her family.

This is, in fact, exactly what would have happened had God not intervened with Joseph and convinced him to father the child.

Although Mary is understandably disturbed, she gradually accepts what the angel reports—“Let it be according to your word.”

Many romanticize this reply as Mary’s humble affirmation of God’s will; I see it more as a begrudging acceptance of something over which she has no control.

It is a while before she can fully accept what is happening, before she can go to her sister, Elizabeth, and announce her pregnancy with the more robust words of the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

This is a real celebration, unlike the tepid, “Let it be according to your word.”

It takes us human beings time to absorb the unexpected, and Mary is no different.

When God works through our lives, it does not always fit into our plans.

We get thrown off course by events, and we often are slow to adapt to the results.

At first we are disturbed, then we may achieve begrudging acceptance, and finally, if we are faithful, we come to understand that God will bring something good out of the challenges, something that we are able to share.

It is therefore easy for us to identify with Mary, which explains her great popularity despite the paucity of information the gospels provide us about her.

Richard Rohr notes that Mary is more like us than is Jesus in that she is not God, but receives the gift from God and hands it on.¹

This is our task, to receive the gift of God’s grace and love, and to pass it on.

We share a lot in common with Mary.

1 Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent, 2021), p. 124.

We understand her bittersweet experience, or as the eastern church calls it, her “bright sadness.”²

No joy in life is without an aspect of pain if, for no other reason, because the joy is passing away even as it happens, thus Mary’s experience is archetypical.

From the excitement of betrothal to the complication of pregnancy through the upbringing of an amazing, God-filled son, to his crucifixion, Mary’s experiences are filled with bright sadness.

We look at her path of joy and loss and see aspects of our own lives.

We extrapolate that, despite what might be considered failures or errors, God loves us just as God loved Mary.

God is working in and through us.

We may not be perfect.

Our plans may fall flat, but, it is precisely through our imperfection that God is able to achieve God’s goals.

Mary’s story helps us to heal our own wounded egos, to forgive our imperfections so that we can move forward.

We become able to find God in all experiences rather than bemoaning that the experiences were not what we intended.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/opinion/what-mary-can-teach-us-about-the-joy-and-pain-of-life.html?searchResultPosition=1>

If Mary had not come to accept that she was pregnant before her life with her intended husband really began, if she had not understood that God was working even in her apparent loss, she might have run away, which would have prevented Jesus from pursuing his ministry because no one would have listened to a bastard child.

Our egos, our plans, our desire to prove ourselves to others stand in the way of what God has planned.

The more we want to demonstrate how great we are, the less good we can do.

The more we can accept God's grace in each situation, the more we can pass on that grace to others just as Mary passed on the gift to us.