

My Brothers and Sisters,

As Christmas draws near, most of us are caught in the hustle and bustle of the season. Today's Liturgy offers us a powerful reminder of the true meaning of the season.

In some sense, the first reading challenges us to answer the question "Where is God to be found?" The context of the reading is important. King David was living in a palace in Jerusalem; the Ark of the Covenant was housed in a tent. David, therefore, decided to build a worthy temple for the Lord, but instead God promised David that he would build the house of David into God's house and kingdom. In today's Gospel, God fulfilled that promise in Jesus: the angel of the Lord came to Mary, "*a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.*"

Where is God to be found? Although there is no exact parallel to this passage in any other Gospel, the closest passage is when the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says that Jesus will be "*Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-with-us'*" [Mt. 1:23]. In fact, Matthew's Gospel emphasizes God's presence in Jesus and Jesus' presence among us: "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I, and I will be with you all days even to the end of the world*" [Mt. 18:20].

Jesus, God, then, is to be found within and among us. If God were speaking to us today, I think he would tell us that Jesus is not to be found primarily in places or things. Personal and communal prayer, scripture, sacraments, love, and service bring Jesus' presence to personal and community consciousness and deepen that presence within and among us.

The second theme of today's Liturgy is articulated in Paul's letter to the Romans and exemplified by Mary. In his book *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, Fr. Avery Dulles identified seven models of faith. One of these is obediential faith, which is found primarily in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In effect, today Paul says that God revealed his mystery and his plan of salvation in Jesus to bring about in us the obedience of faith.

According to Fr. Dulles, obedient faith is the total response of a person to God's Word in its fullness. In other words, obedient faith is not primarily keeping commandments but radical discipleship, the kind of discipleship to which Jesus called people, giving up everything to follow Jesus.

Mary, in today's Gospel, was the perfect model of obedient faith. Full of God's life and love from the beginning of her existence, God called her through the angel Gabriel to become the mother of his own Son. Mary's only question was how this could happen since she was a virgin. Once Gabriel explained that the child would be born through the power of God, Mary immediately entrusted her whole life to God: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*"

My brothers and sisters, the Fourth Sunday of Advent reminds us that God is to be found within and among us and that God's presence calls us to follow Jesus with our whole lives.