

4th Sunday of Advent - B
2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16;
Romans 16:25-27;
Luke 1:26-38
Little Flower - 12/20/20

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent. If the Gospels for the last two Sundays focused on John the Baptist, today's Gospel introduces Mary and tells the story of the Annunciation.

We know, of course, that the Gospels were not written from a psychological perspective. However, we are told that Mary was greatly troubled by the angel's words "*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.*" and pondered what sort of greeting it was. When the angel told her that she was to have a child who would be the Son of the Most High, she questioned how this could be since she did not have relations with a man. Finally, after the angel answered her question, she said, "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*" Like Mary, when called by God, we should wonder, we should question, we should respond.

As much as the story tells us about Mary, it tells us even more about God. Several years ago, Pope Francis gave a homily that was titled the "The God of Surprises." According to Pope Francis, when God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and parted the Red Sea, those were surprises. He reminded his listeners that Jesus often did surprising things like eating with tax collectors and sinners. We can only imagine Mary's surprise when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and her even greater surprise at the angel's words to her. What could be more surprising than God sending his Son to become one of us, to live among us as one of us, and then to die for us. Jesus was God's biggest surprise!

At his first press conference after being named Archbishop of Indianapolis, Archbishop Tobin defined faith as the capacity to be surprised by God: "If you look at Scripture, it is full of a lot of surprised people, people in exile, people forgotten, a world that thought that God lived worlds beyond the last star, only to discover that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son.... We allow God to surprise us because we know that God is faithful." For young children, almost everything is a surprise. Even at my age, my favorite Christmas gifts are surprises. As adults, are we still able and willing to be surprised by God?

Another key theme today is the question of where God is to be found. In today's first reading, living in his new palace and in relative peace with his enemies, King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord. Through Nathan, God reminded David that God was with David wherever David went. Also, God revealed that He was going to establish a house for David, a house and a kingdom that would endure forever. In other words, instead of David building a house for God, God was going to establish a house and kingdom for David.

My brothers and sisters, many of us who are older were raised to think of churches as the primary place of God's presence. It seems to me that God is reminding us that he is omnipresent. God's presence, power, and activity cannot be circumscribed, boxed in, limited, or controlled. Jesus, of course, embodied the presence of God. As the angel revealed to Joseph, "*they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'*" [Mt. 1:23]. We, the Church, embody the presence of Jesus. Jesus is present in his Word, in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and in his Spirit. The Spirit of God is present within and among us and others. As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "*He does not ration his gift of the Spirit*" [3:34]. What this means is that we have to be open to the presence, power, and activity of God in our lives and in our world however and through whomever it manifests itself.