

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Today's Gospel introduces the figure of Mary and tells the story of the Annunciation.

However, to understand the richness of the story, we have to understand it in relation to the first reading. In 2 Samuel, David wanted to build a temple for God. He said to Nathan the Prophet, "*Here I am living in a house of cedar while the ark of God dwells in a tent.*" God, however, rejected David's plan. In effect, God's answer was that he did not need a house. He had been and would continue to be in the midst of his people. You might remember that the Ark of the Covenant was frequently moved with the people. In a sense, David was trying to limit God's presence to one place, the temple. In effect, God told David that David could not limit God's presence, power, and activity.

As Christians, we are often guilty of wanting to restrict God's presence, power, and activity. We do this in several different ways. First, we sometimes believe and act as though God's presence is found primarily in the church as building rather than in the people in the church. A church needs people to be a church. What is a church building? It is primarily the place where the Christian community comes together to hear the Word of God, to celebrate Eucharist and the other sacraments, and to leave empowered to bring Christ to the world. In the church, God is present in his Word, in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and in the people.

A second way we try to box in God's presence, power, and activity is when we separate our faith and our everyday life. We act one way in church and in completely different ways the rest of the week. We talk the talk but do not walk the walk. For example, a teenager once told me about a parishioner who appeared so holy and religious in church but was consistently rude to her when she worked as a cashier at the grocery store.

Third, sometimes Christians want to limit whom God can work through only to their own co-religionists and to people who live stellar moral lives. In other words, some Christians find it hard to believe that God would work through people of other faith traditions or people with flawed lives. The truth is that God chooses to work through whomever he chooses. In fact, in the history of our church, some of the greatest saints started out as the greatest sinners, e.g., St. Augustine.

Finally, sometimes we do not want to allow God to work through us because we do not believe that we are good enough or have anything to give. However, in the Preface of Martyrs in the former Sacramentary, we prayed, "You choose the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness to you."

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel, God chose a young girl to be the mother of his only Son. However, even before Jesus was conceived, even before Jesus was physically within her body, we know that God was present and active in and through her from the words of the angel, "*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.*" As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we need to understand that Jesus is present not primarily in churches but in people. We need to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to his presence within us and others.