

4th Sunday of Advent

A baptism begins with three questions. I ask the parents what they call their child and the reason why they've come. Most of them give the infant's name and then answer, "Baptism." Then I explain what we expect of them—that they'll raise the child to love God and neighbor. Finally, following the ritual, I ask this third question while they hold the infant in their arms: "Do you understand this responsibility?" They always answer, "Yes." And I always want to say, "No, you don't. You can't possibly understand what you are undertaking. I don't have any kids, and even I know that." But every parent answers with confidence, and I move on and baptize the child, as if to say to them all, "You'll be fine."

In today's gospel, Mary's situation is similar but different. It's similar because she says yes to a responsibility she cannot fully understand. But it's different because the angel never really asked her if she would do it. This is called the annunciation because Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Jesus. The only question being asked is Mary's: How can this be? She was engaged, but she had no relations with a man. Gabriel does not answer the question directly, but continues announcing things: The Holy Spirit would come upon her, as the Spirit had come upon Old Testament figures such as David the king and Isaiah the prophet. Gabriel also announced the power of the Most High would overshadow her, providing Mary shelter and relief. But, regarding Mary's concerns about what sort of greeting she had heard, how greatly troubled she felt, and how impossible this all seemed, Gabriel does not really answer how this could be. Instead, he declares God's call in the moment and God's protection for what will come to pass. He basically says, "You'll be fine."

Whether or not we are parents, many of us have unexpectedly encountered what someone else thinks is good news, but doesn't immediately feel like good news to us. We may be puzzled by the greeting we hear, apprehensive by the word, and frightened about a situation we did not choose, we thought was impossible, and now has altered our world. At such critical junctures of life, we may ask God, "How can this be?"

In Mary's case, Gabriel made a further annunciation of another pregnancy, that of Elizabeth, who conceived in her old age. That finally convinced Mary. But many of us don't get such corroborating evidence. Instead, we hear this message from friends, family or God in our prayer: "You'll be fine." It does not always instill confidence until we remember what else God has done.

Mary manifests many virtues in this passage. When the angel appears, Mary is troubled, reflective and scared. When the angel announces her pregnancy, Mary is realistic, bold and inquisitive. After the angel tells her more, Mary makes her declaration: "Yes. Let it be."

At critical moments of life, we are not always as confident as Mary or as parents of newborns. We do understand the responsibility. Like Mary we may be troubled, reflective and scared. We may ask questions. But even when we do not hear the answer we want, God may give us our own annunciation: "You'll be fine." If we remember what else God has done, we can say with Mary, "Let it be."