

Baccalaureate Mass
December 17, 2004 | St. Ignatius Church

This is the Gospel pattern of God doing great things through people who say “yes” when God calls out to them.

Today we celebrate a major milestone for those of you who are receiving your diplomas. We naturally look towards the future on this happy and hopeful occasion, and our first reading appropriately directs our eyes to the future. That passage from Isaiah [Is. 35, 1-6] does not describe the world as it is, but paints a dramatically contrasting picture of the world as it could be. When the present is all too painful and people struggle just to survive, their hope is in the future because it is all they have. Without such hope, our spirits dry up and we wither away.

Our first reading [Is. 35, 1-6] held out hope to the Jews who had suffered defeat and conquest by Assyria, followed by the anguish and misery of exile, made all the more hopeless by the brutality and humiliation of enslavement. This passage promised those exiled slaves a future dramatically different from their painful present; without this hope the Jews might have just lied down and died.

Now, fast forward about seven centuries to Mary in our Gospel reading [Lk. 1, 39-55]. Here we see a young woman almost overpowered with the realization that God’s promised future is taking flesh in her. This realization is reinforced by the greeting of her cousin Elizabeth. Mary is stunned by God’s inexplicable choice of her – a poor, illiterate, unskilled, peasant girl – to realize God’s hopes for the world. And so she breaks into a joyful hymn of praise to a God who accomplishes great things through the lowly, the unaccomplished and the unacknowledged.

This is the pattern! This is how God works – through people like Abraham and Sarah and Mary and Joseph who say yes to God. More often than not, it is very ordinary – even less than ordinary – people whose lives proclaim the greatness of God. God works through people whom CNN, Oprah Winfrey and *People* magazine never even hear about.

Fast forward once again to contemporary Haiti and journalist Randall Frame who, on a visit to that desperately poor country, found himself at an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy, one of whom placed in his hands a baby girl so fragile that he could see the skeleton beneath her skin. As he cradled that baby in his arms he reflected:

“I am suddenly and fully aware of my weakness and limitations. And aware also of the limitations and shortcomings of humanity, which has somehow failed this child and many others like her. My four-bedroom house, my physical health and strength, the Pittsburgh Steelers – all fade into irrelevance. I am utterly powerless to determine whether this child, who bears the image of God will live or die. But I do have power – complete power – to make certain that if and when her frail body finally yields, she has felt the security, the comfort, of someone’s loving arms. Tonight they are my arms. It’s the least I can do for her and, also, perhaps the most. Her weak but gracious eyes look up to mine. And hold

their gaze. And in the sacred silence of this moment, there is no other power I crave, no other purpose I desire.”

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Several years ago local writer Leslie Larson volunteered for a San Francisco Public Library program that taught illiterate adults to read and write – skills that we probably take for granted. At the conclusion of the program they put together a small booklet of each student’s best work which each one read during the ceremony that marked the program’s end. Larson describes the scene for us:

“One by one students came to the podium to read their pieces. A young mother told how, for the first time, she was able to help her kids with their homework. Another young woman read about the new feelings of self worth she got from filling out a job application. A thirty-something guy read a paragraph about how good it felt to get on a bus with a newspaper under his arm ... Each person’s story was heartfelt and the pride he or she felt in reading from the printed page was evident. It was very moving and the applause was thunderous.”

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A student who spent a semester studying in El Salvador described eight-year-old Jasmin as someone whose hair was always a mess and who somehow always managed to be filthy within five minutes of bathing in the river. The student continued:

“One afternoon on our way to a soccer game as we were bumping along in the back of an overloaded pickup, the wind blowing through our hair and making our eyes water, Jasmin produced a big, round, juicy purple grape. As I watched her intently poke the grape with her grimy fingers, I wondered what she was doing. After few moments, she stared up at me with her big dark eyes and long eyelashes and holding her grimy hand out to me, she placed the grape in my hand. She had perfectly divided the grape in half to share it with me. There was a moment of hesitation on my part – wondering where those hands had been and whether or not I should eat it ... of course I should eat this precious gift! As I chewed the half grape I savored the juiciness, the miracle, the sweetness, the sacredness. Who thinks to share one lonely grape? ... Who takes the effort to break a grape perfectly in half? My eight-year-old friend with the hair that is always a mess and hands that are always grimy teaches me what it means to share, to live, to love.”

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And then there is the grandmother in the deep South during the shameful period of racial segregation who, to the utter disgust of her eighteen year old grandson, cleaned the bathroom at the back of Minne’s Beauty Salon every business day of the year for over

seventeen years, so that African Americans would have a bathroom available to them when they were downtown. She cleaned that bathroom so thoroughly that the porcelain was worn off the toilet by her daily scrubbing with steel wool. Her grandson repeatedly and angrily berated her for voluntarily undertaking such a degrading and menial task. Every day that woman recalled to herself the pain and deadly embarrassment of her own mother on a horrible day many years before. She heard again the low moans that began deep inside her mother as they hurried their steps along the sidewalk in a desperate but doomed search for a bathroom available to black persons in a commercial area with “white only” facilities. Her grandson might never understand, but she did this for her mother. She told herself, “it was the best she could do to take up her mother’s pain... that out of pain and degradation could spring a fire of purpose that went so far beyond anger and rhetoric, that carried with it a passion fueled with kindling carried by a servant, a slave, a bathroom cleaner.” This is the Gospel pattern of God doing great things through people who say “yes” when God calls out to them.

Our lives, too, can proclaim the God who does great things, if we would only say yes when God calls out to us. We remind ourselves that for God, great things are as remarkable and as unremarkable as sharing a grape or learning to read as an adult or taking a suffering child into our arms or cleaning a bathroom.

We are the ones through whom God comes to save the world. We are the world’s promised future. We are the ones who usher in that world promised by Isaiah where feeble hands are strengthened, weak knees made firm and frightened hearts calmed. This is our dignity and our challenge and this is the world’s best hope for salvation.

My prayer today for all of us, but especially for you graduates of USF, is that you will say yes to God when God calls out to you, and that your lives will evidence to the great things that God may do through you.