

Baccalaureate Mass

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Readings: Isaiah 48: 17–19 & Luke 1: 39–45

The first reading’s assertion about God “teaching us what is for our good and leading us on the way we should go” is ideal for a commencement liturgy at a Jesuit Catholic university. Learning what is for our — every human being’s — good and how to achieve it is an as-important, if never ending, learning exercise as what you have absorbed here through your studies in whatever fields or disciplines. In light of that selection about God “teaching us” and “showing us the way”, the second reading about Mary visiting Elizabeth is quite instructive.

Now, I have to confess this Gospel reading is not among my favorites. For me, it conjures up Renaissance and Baroque paintings depicting the majestically robed young Mary embracing her elderly and equally elegant older cousin, Elizabeth. This tableau is preceded by that of an angel appearing to Mary, the flower of all God’s creation, and Mary hearing from the angel that she is pregnant and soon to become the mother of the Messiah. Fra Angelico’s painting of the scene of Mary and the angel of annunciation is a common Christmas card image.

The truth is that Mary was not an elegantly dressed woman of courtly manners, soft skin, light complexion and polished bearing. She was a dark-skinned teenager who probably went barefoot in a dirt floored hut, was surely illiterate and rather crude by our standards of hygiene and etiquette. She was a shrewd, hard-nosed peasant who found herself unexpectedly pregnant and surely wanted to get advice and support at this most disconcerting moment from a trusted and dear friend. Hence, the visit to her older cousin, Elizabeth.

Before Mary can get a word out, Elizabeth blesses her among all women and the baby she will have. Mary received the reassurance and support that she came for without even opening her mouth, and she breaks out into the great song of the Magnificat, which is today’s gospel.

What does Mary sing about? Not about herself, but about God. A God who chooses the little instead of the big; the weak instead of the strong. A God who lifts up the lowly and puts down the mighty. A God who makes fruitful a young virgin and a barren old woman. Mary sang because she realized she was chosen by God, not because of her purity and goodness — later generations would make that mistake — but because she was a nobody in a nothing town. How extraordinary that of all the possibilities God broke into her life to teach her what was good and show her the way!

We celebrate Mary as the Mother of Jesus not because she deserves it, but because she does *not* deserve it. No one does. That is the point of the Gospel story. As long as we imagine the Mary of the paintings — perfect woman of queenly stature, ideal choice for mother of the Messiah — we can go about our lives confident that because we are not made of the same stuff as she, God will not break into our lives “to teach us what is good

and show us the way.”

Mary sings about a God who turns everything upside down — for her, for you, for me. The Gospel story we call the Visitation says that if God could break into the life of an ignorant, small-town peasant girl, God could and would do it to all the lonely, lowly, broken, and insignificant people such as you and me. That’s what Mary sang about.

The gospel is not a story about the visit of two regal women reassuring each other about God’s wisdom in choosing them. It is a story of the meeting of two bewildered peasant women stunned by the realization of God’s breaking into their insignificant lives.

To understand this, is to open our own lives to God. It is to know that God strains gently and subtly to “teach us what is good and show us the way.” To put Mary on a pedestal — to confuse great art with good theology — is to take us off the hook. The Gospel consistently speaks of the lives of little people being broken into by God and that pattern continues in our own times. We cannot escape asking ourselves where and how God works in our lives to teach us and show us the way.

Many years ago when the great African American contralto, Marian Anderson, was asked to name the greatest moment of her life — for example, the concert she gave at the White House, receiving the \$10,000 Bach award, Toscanini’s proclaiming her the greatest voice of the 20th century — she said the greatest moment of her life was the day she went home and told her mother she would no longer have to take in washing.

That, in nutshell, is the Gospel we just heard today. Mary was a washer-women, a minority person in an occupied territory, living in a miserable backwater town and God broke into her life. Today we celebrate what God did for Mary, what God has done for you here at USF, and what God wants to continue do for you and me.

Take a moment to look back and reflect on where and how God broke into your life and changed you during your time at USF — an experience that challenged you to rethink your life’s priorities, a class that opened you to the realities of global poverty, an encounter that helped you accept your own fragility, a tragedy that led you to question the purpose of life, a relationship that made you feel good about yourself and confident about your future. However and wherever it happened, recognize and celebrate God breaking into your life to teach you what is good and show you the way.

My prayer this morning is that during your time at USF, you have acquired some awareness of what God hopes for from you. May you leave here with the realization and conviction that God has lifted you up; that God has given you good things; that God who is mighty has and will continue to do great things through you if you let God break into your life and teach you what is good for us all and show you the way.

Let us go now to the table and receive the nourishment that we need to walk in the ways of the Lord.

[This homily draws extensively from Wm. J. Bausch, *Story Telling the Word*, pp. 143 – 146]