

Baccalaureate Mass  
December 17, 2010  
St. Ignatius Church

Today's readings take us back to the beginning of the story that many of us will soon celebrate: the birth of Jesus. The story begins not in Bethlehem but in Nazareth with a teenager known to us only as "Mary." However Christian churches understand Mary's role, they all agree that it was her unique, historical calling by God's gracious will to be the woman who gave birth to Jesus.

Why Mary? The gospels give no hint as to why God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus. The choice is rooted in the goodness of God, not the merits of Mary. I recall Paddy Chayefsky's play *Gideon* and the dialogue there between Gideon and God's angel that speaks to this issue and may reveal our own feelings about ourselves. Gideon says, "What is it that you love in me, my God? These others were all saints or prophets, but I am an ordinary sort. I am as all people are." The angel replied, "Well, perhaps, that is your special attraction, your ordinariness. I would have plain men and women love me, not just saints."

"Plain men and women, not just saints" -- whatever else Mary-with-no-last-name was, "plain and ordinary" are indisputable describers. She was a barefoot, uneducated, illiterate, peasant in a backwater town, in an occupied country, in a culture where women were held in low esteem. We are too easily seduced by the winged angels in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation into believing that Mary traveled through life on a path different from our own, especially where God was concerned. A path, we incorrectly assume, that was marked by clarity and certainty with regard to what God asked of her.

A closer look at today's Gospel indicates otherwise. Do not be distracted by the image of a feathered angel bearing "good news." Look rather at Mary's reaction to this startling intervention, however it happened. Mary, we are told, was "greatly troubled," "fearful," "wondered what this meant" and "how it could possibly come to be."

Why was Mary "deeply troubled" and "fearful"? Why? Because Mary, like us, was completely human.

God's interventions are sometimes "warm and fuzzy" and leave us feeling affirmed, safe and cozy. But more often they're the kind Mary experienced in today's Gospel. God deeply troubles us with a message we do not fully understand or a challenge we fear we are unable to handle. In doing so, although we may not understand it at the time, God honors us as God honored Mary. Why Mary? Why us? The answer lies in God, not us – in God's boundless grace, limitless generosity and deep desire to be with us. We do know that letting God into our lives does not free us from fear and doubt and anxiety about who we are called to be.

I remind you that Mary's "yes" to God led to a life of extraordinary suffering and pain. Jesus was born in a stable, warmed only by the breath of animals; the family fled into Egypt to avoid

persecution, where they lived in exile for several years; an adolescent Jesus deserted his parents for a time in Jerusalem; this “Son of the Most High” was finally arrested, tortured and judicially murdered as a malefactor. How could Mary possibly believe through all this that she “need not be afraid” or that she “had found favor with God” or that her son was “great” and “would rule over the house of Jacob forever”?

Mary’s question must certainly be the question in the heart of each one of us plain, ordinary folk, “how can this be?” How can what is of me and in my flesh be Divine? How can God touch me that intimately, that lovingly and bring new life out of me now in my flesh? How can I, how can we, together, be God’s word made flesh of our plain, ordinary stuff?

To all of us and each of us, God’s wondrous word is spoken again and again, “hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” In each one of us God asks to be born again, to live and love, to labor and save our world. Why are plain, ordinary people like us called to this awesome responsibility? If we cannot explain *why*, we may confidently assert *that* God reaches out to partner with us for God’s reasons, not ours. Abraham Lincoln came close to an explanation when he said, “God must have loved plain ordinary, people because He made so many of us.”

For you graduates, and for all of us, this is a time to listen for God’s word and welcome the promise of God’s coming again into our life and our world. It is a time to notice how God would take flesh in all of us and to marvel at the signs of new life in ourselves, our church and our world. As you enter your future – however uncertain – trust that the Holy Spirit will “come upon you” and “the power of God overshadow” every step you take on your journey. It is a time to believe, with Mary, and against all odds that “nothing is impossible with God.” It is a time, finally, to say with Mary and without illusions about the consequences, “I am the servant of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.”