

December 24, 2017

4th Sunday in Advent

**And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done to me according to your word."**

*"God is hovering over us, pressing in on us, trying to enter in and be one with us.
It is for this we are being created."*

The Culture of the Ancient Middle East

In Luke's account of the Annunciation, a masculine angel visits Mary who seems to be in the hidden quarters of her family home. The angel is an intruder, and the scene would strike any Mediterranean person as suspicious, angel notwithstanding. Mary finds herself in an embarrassing and potentially shameful situation. Should anything happen to her in the family home, her father and brothers would be shamed for not taking proper care of her. This was the mind-set of the first-century world and culture of Palestine.

**And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done to me according to your word."**

Ian Matthews, a British Carmelite who wrote a book called, "The Impact of God," writes, *"For us there is only one goal: union with God. It is for this that we are always hungering. Every dissatisfaction is at its root hunger for God.* Clearly union with God was what Mary hungered for. Nothing less would have satisfied her heart. And yet, her hunger for God was in truth her experience of God's love for her.

Isn't this true for all of us? Our care, our love for someone is but a continuation of God's love for us, without our even realizing it. I remember my niece describing how she felt when her baby was facing heart surgery. She said she was so tuned into that little girl that she found herself actually "willing" her baby to live. Wasn't she receiving an annunciation: *"God hovering over her, pressing in on her, willing her to live and be one with her."* Isn't this true for all of us?

I remember an article called "Compassion in the Margins" which was written in 2003 in a periodical by the House of Charity in Spokane which provides meals and lodgings for men and women on the streets. It reads:

“I work at the House of Charity, a program of Catholic Charities in downtown Spokane. Recently as I was heading to the kitchen for my seventh cup of coffee, my supervisor glanced up in my direction. I asked him how he was doing. He shook his head and said simply, “Why am I here?”

This is why I am here: Ralph, a guest of the House of Charity, grew up in the Southwest. He told me that his mother used to put whiskey in his baby bottle to keep him from crying. Ralph is a quiet man, usually sits in the back corner and watches everybody else. He once showed me the scar on his right hand and told me he killed the man who hit his mother. He has spent a significant portion of his life in prison. Ralph stays upstairs most nights, but some nights he stays outside hiding in the back alley ways smoking crack.

One day, a man came in suffering from Multiple Sclerosis. He was off his medication and his body movements were uncontrollable. He came to lunch wearing a motorcycle helmet, a leather jacket, and leather pants. The man looked like something out of the movies. I had gotten him something to eat and quickly moved on to the next person. As I was leaving the man, I glanced back. He couldn't eat because he couldn't pick up the spoon. Slowly, Ralph made his way from the other side of the dining room. The addicted felon sat next to the man suffering from M.S., asked if he needed any help, and began to feed him.

This is why I am here. It is only when we stand with the demonized that demonization stops. It is only when we stand with the people on the outer fringes of compassion that the circle of compassion can expand. It is only when we stand at the margins that the margins once and for all disappear. It is only when we stand with the disposable that people stop being disposed of. It is only when we stand within marginal spaces that the marginalized can begin to see the circle of compassion expanding in them.”

The love that Ralph showed in feeding that homeless man with M.S. was but a reflection of God's love flowing through Ralph. That man was an annunciation to Ralph.

**And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done to me according to your word.”**

We don't draw ourselves closer to God, it is God who draws us closer to God's Self. It is God who is constantly hovering over us, pressing in on us, trying to enter into closer union with us. Our work is to allow this to happen, to open our doors and allow God “to move in” with us and be willing to let go of past hurts, of feeling abandoned, hurt and afraid, where we refuse to forgive, and to stay there until God's mercy and compassion have softened us enough to move past these hurts and reach out to care for each other - including our wounded country. Nothing less will satisfy our human heart.

Our projects, our home, our companion or whatever we strive for can never bring us complete happiness. Working towards some hope or some purpose comes out of our creative side. The trick is not to think that any of these will bring complete happiness. They won't. There will always be something else we will want, that we will hunger for. It is as Henry David Thoreau once said, "*Many go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.*"

*"God is hovering over us, pressing in on us, trying to enter in and be one with us.
It is for this we are being created."*

**"Behold, we are the hand-servants of the Lord.
May it be done to us according to Your Word"**

Happy Annunciation, Everyone!