

It isn't often we have two women featured so prominently on a Sunday. And with a message of such relevance to us at any time of year! In Orthodox iconography Mary of Nazareth is referred to as either the Mother of God or the Theotokos, which means the God-bearer. This is exactly what Elizabeth perceives upon greeting her beloved relative. "How can this happen to me, that the mother of my *Lord* should come to me?"

For us an even greater astonishment: God also comes to us.

It is astounding that God should come from so insignificant a place as Bethlehem.

It is even more astounding that the Son of God should come to share our humanity.

Any of us can be overjoyed at a visit from a beloved relative. This exchange between Elizabeth and God within Mary invites us to recognize and rejoice over the abiding presence of Jesus, who is also our beloved relative and friend.

Blessed is she who believes. Also translated: Blessed is she who trusted.

Visitation is not only a symbol for God in our lives. It is also the way we enter each other.

Trust is important for us. We live in a world in which we are taught to insist on proof and are encouraged to disbelieve miracles. Yet the miraculous has tremendous power to inspire and transform. Whether one believes in the Virgin birth or another interpretation of the story, the fact is that Mary gave birth to Jesus, God Incarnate. GOD INCARNATE!

In my spiritual life the Bible has served well as a source for illumination and guidance, for instruction in how to grow as a Christian. The Mother of God has become for me the epitome of who we as humans, male and female, are asked to be in our lives today. She's an excellent example of all that we are to do and be. We are to become bearers of Christ into the world.

Some of us have been mothers. All of us have had mothers, but let's take a moment to ponder the mother she was: The Mother *of* God Incarnate, not only that, but the mother *for* God. My own difficulty early on was with her seeming to be so meek, mild, and acquiescing. Then I realized she was acquiescing to GOD. This girl of 14 had the faith, courage and spiritual maturity of a wise and aged monk! She chose to accept God's will in a culture where women followed the rules and expectations of others. Are we able to say that we do the same, follow God's will in spite of others' expectations?

How can we do this and how might it look if we did?

By accepting certain inalienable truths:

God loves us, all of us, and forgives us.

We are made in the image of God, without exception.

We are called, as children of God, to be Christ in our world today.

We are called to give birth to Christ *for* and *with* each other.

This sounds like community, a Beloved Community. These things will only happen when we, like Mary, each put ourselves in service to the greater good, in service to God. When what *we* want takes a back seat to what builds each other and our community in the mind and heart of Christ.

Hours of lip service can be given to describing this state, but it means nothing if we live with our hearts in judgment, blame or negativity. Each time one of us opens our mouth and allows something negative to emerge, we have failed to be Christ in the world and must begin again. Beginning again is terribly important. It takes determination, practice and a sincere change of heart to change a habit like negative thinking.

It also takes determination and practice to learn to respond to such expressions in a Christlike manner, with courage and centeredness. Doing so can feel counter cultural, not “nice”, however, it offers opportunities for profound healing.

The Beautiful Corner has been using Richard Rohr’s Preparing for Christmas during Advent. He writes about *Dualistic and Non-Dualistic* thinking. Dualistic thinking sees everything as “either/or”: black OR white, good OR bad, right OR wrong, that is, in mutually exclusive terms. Non-Dualistic thinking views everything as “both/and”. The greatest of our Christian spiritual images invariably involve paradox and are embraced readily by Non-Dualistic thinking.

Jesus is human and divine at the same time;

Mary was a Virgin and a mother at the same time;

the Eucharist is bread and Jesus at the same time;

God is both three and one at the same time.

As Rohr writes, “*Wisdom is to know how to hear and see on different levels at the same time...*”

Metaphorically, the Mother of God is a vessel of pure heart and obedience who stands open and ready to receive God’s gift of Grace and to grow Christ within, even if it means behaving counter to her culture.

Grace is a gift. Whether it is extreme as in the case of Mary and other inexplicable miracles, or moderate as in the quiet experience of the presence of God, it is a gift – not a “given”. We cannot create, demand, nor expect it. In liturgy the way is cleared for us to receive. However, if we think too much, or work too hard offering excited, emotional expressions, we actually turn away from the goal of making ourselves ready. Feeling high or low means nothing on the spiritual path – having trust in and love for God means everything.

We are imperfect vessels. God forgives us our imperfection and loves us anyway. We must do the same to be ready to receive the Christ. We must make room to receive by emptying ourselves of attachment to things of the world, emptying ourselves of self-centeredness and negativity. It is our task to love God first, detach from “that which shall perish”, and move about our lives in service to the greater good.

Moments of Grace cannot be created by us. God doesn't seem to respond to our demands and self-serving expectations with the answers we want. God does respond to our diligence and obedience. Obedience to His will.

How do we know God's will?

We know it by treating each other as if each one of us is the God-bearer.

By worshipping in a place that we make safe by our own actions and attitudes.

By taking responsibility rather than laying blame in conversations – in all conversations.

Like Mary, we are the Theotokos, the God-bearer.

Like Jesus, we are the Christ.

We must, then, be giving birth to Christ in each other.

The place to begin is by looking within, examining our attitudes and perspectives. The next step is to participate in each and every conversation *in the Love of Christ*. This may result in needing to ask someone to consider changing their tone of voice or offering them a more constructive perspective. It is not rude to do this, *kindly*. We need only review Gospel stories to see that Jesus did not lend himself to those who approached with negative energy. Consider yourself like Gabriel the angel messenger offering glad tidings to Mary – offering Christ to your friend in Christ. The gift offered may be accepted or rejected. Either way, the choice is always, ultimately ours.

Today, the day before one of the grandest nights in the Christian year

Let us all be like Elizabeth and let our spirits leap with joy at the coming of Christ.

Let us be eager to see with our eyes what we know with our spirits.

Today, we are all the Mother of God, filled with anticipation, with Christ, with Good News, with God's greatest gift.

Tomorrow night all Heaven will break loose!    Accept this gift!

And the People said: Amen.