



Christmas Message 2018

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The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God... For nothing will be impossible with God. (Luke 1:30ff.)

"How can this be?" There is a lot to that question. On the one hand, Mary is certainly asking how it is that she will get biologically from point "A" to point "B". What the angel told her was indeed perplexing news. It was news that didn't at all suggest a standard route to having a child. It didn't make sense to Mary. It wouldn't have made sense to any of us either. Mary had every reason to be perplexed.

But Mary's question is more than an inquiry about a seemingly impossible future. It also is an expression of her deep uncertainty. It is a prototypical human response to hearing the news that life as she knows it is about to change radically. All those plans and dreams that Mary had for her life – the ones she pondered in her heart everyday – had just evaporated before her eyes - "poof" - blown away by the announcement of an angel. "How can this be" is as much an utterance of fear and concern as it is a question about biological condition. Behind it lays the deeper uncertainty of whether this impending change will be a good change or nothing more than the curse of a malevolent force.

Fortunately, the angel does not leave Mary alone in her uncertainty. Instead, knowing the depth of Mary's question, and the depth of our question too when we are in parallel circumstances, the angel reminds Mary of the greatest and most hopeful truth of all – that God is in the business of blessing his creation and that with God *nothing is impossible*.

At first hearing, such angelic words might sound like a mere claim to Mary, and to all of us, to simply "take it on faith" that God can pull off such a biological miracle. Indeed, God can! But a deeper hearing suggests that something much more profound is being proclaimed. The core message of the Annunciation is not so much a claim about miraculous biology as it is one about how, through faith, the followers of Jesus are invited to participate in God's future. God comes to us from the future as divine blessing, as the one who continuously opens up endless possibility to our lives – possibilities that are unimaginable. This is the source of hope that gives us strength and courage to traverse our present circumstances.

What I find so compelling about Mary is her openness to finding her faith not in certainty, but through trusting in God's future. Through faith, her fear about what she cannot

control is suddenly transformed into joy about what she is yet to receive, and in that transformation she becomes “God bearer”.

Here on the eve of my retirement as bishop I find that hope in God’s future is what I have the privilege to bear in my heart. Despite the obvious challenges that our churches face these days, and despite the social challenges before us in our country, I am hopeful that whatever lies ahead for us, whatever the terrain may look like, God will be there exercising gracious love through the lives of the Mary’s of this world – using the faithfulness of ordinary people to bring about miraculous moments of grace and transformation and new life. As Christians we have the momentous task of bearing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. But we also have the blessing of knowing at the end of the day that this is God’s world we live in and God will do what God will do, especially when our doing has been too weak, or too frail, or inadequate. And in that knowledge we are reminded that our calling is never so much about maintaining or *fixing* the Church as it is about learning how to accept God’s invitation to simply *be* the Church for the sake of the world.

So, I take my leave from you feeling inspired by the miraculous faith of Mary and filled with the promise of a birth soon to take place in Bethlehem. With God, truly, nothing is impossible! The future, no matter how uncertain it may seem at times, will always be filled with new life for those who believe.

Peace and Merry Christmas,
+Holly