

## Homily for December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent



When Fr. Richard Rohr, the great Franciscan I love to quote, was newly ordained, he concocted a private agreement between himself and God; they were going to be a team. It was going to be a 50-50 arrangement. God would do 50% of the work in bringing salvation to the world, and Richard would make sure, through hard work and dedication, that he did his 50% as well. A few years into

ordained ministry, Richard, unilaterally modified the percentages to 70-30, realizing that God was doing most of the heavy lifting anyway, and should get most of the credit. Recently, as a much older priest, Richard tweaked the contract again; now it's 98-2, and quickly moving to 100-0. What is happening in him, and in any person who discerns how God is working in their life, is that he was becoming less like King David in today's first reading and more like Mary in today's gospel. Let me explain the contrasting paths King David and Mary separately took and see if there is an invitation for us.

In the first reading, we hear that King David is not feeling so good about the fact that he lives in a cedar house while the ark of God (the ark being the sacred container of the 10 Commandments) was housed in a tent! The ark was a symbol of God's abiding presence. When you were in the presence of the ark, you were in the presence of God, no question about it. David wants to build God a proper house. He wants to do this either because he feels guilty living in a luxurious house way better than God's tent, or he wants to do this to impress God by showing that he is a good boy. Whatever his motivation, it all gets turned on its head when the prophet Nathan tells King David that he has it all wrong. Nathan tells King David that God is not at all interested in what David wants to do for Him, but God is more intent on doing something for David. What God wants to do through David, if David will allow him, is to build a kingdom that ***shall be established forever***. Houses come and houses go, even if they are built of cedar, but God's dwelling among us will be forever. What God wants to build in and through us will never crumble or decay.

This is the great and necessary turnaround in all of our lives, not just in King David's life or Richard Rohr's life. We all start off thinking we are going to do something for God, much like a 50-50 agreement, but by the end of our lives we know God has done it all for and through us. What we thought was a bilateral covenant with God was really unilateral with grace filling in all the gaps. Maybe that is why the angel Gabriel described Mary as "**full of grace.**" Grace is never anything we do but what God does for us. Mary is the refreshing contrast to King David. Mary is only like David briefly when she assumes she has to initiate the conception. She thinks she has to do something in order to give birth to Jesus. The angel Gabriel, like Nathan of old, says that she has it all wrong. She must let something happen to her. Mary must let the Holy Spirit descend upon her. When she opens to the Spirit of the Most High, new possibilities of life will emerge. The impossible will become possible. I believe that is true of all of us: when we open to the Spirit of the Most High, what we thought was impossible becomes possible.

Mary is not a passive young woman, meek and mild. She is actively engaging and coinciding with the power of the divine. She does not passively say yes to something she has no choice in. What she does, instead, is courageously give the mystery of God permission to unfold in her. The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will give birth to a son, and this son will receive from the Lord God the throne of his father David, and will reign forever. This is not a cedar house that will eventually decay; no, this is a kingdom that will last forever. Mary, are you in? Mary answers, "**let it be done to me according to your word.**" In other words, "I'm all yours."

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say something similar to what Mary said. We say: "let your kingdom come, your will be done..." If I am serious about inviting God's kingdom to play out on earth as it is playing out already in heaven, then my little kingdom must go so that God's great kingdom can come. My cedar house, my plans, my feelings of superiority, all my agendas for looking good and protecting myself must go, so that God's kingdom, which is not made of human hands or human agendas, can finally come.

This is the beginning of Luke's gospel. Notice how Mary's words, "**Let it be done according to your word**" are almost identical to Jesus' words at the end of Luke's gospel. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, "**Not my will but yours be done.**" Like Mary, Jesus is not throwing up his hands and passively giving up

because he has no choice. Just the opposite. He is, like Mary, actively asking God to align his little, human will with God's divine will so that the impossible will become possible, and love will finally triumph over hatred and even over death itself.

The Latin word for "let it be done" is **fiat**, like the name of the Italian car company. Our fiat is the essential ingredient that enables the mystery of God's presence and God's love to unfold in the world. Without us, God will not; without God, we cannot. There is another fiat, another "let it be done," that came long before Mary and Jesus's fiats. It came in the moment of creation. God, the Creator, said, "let it be" and it was. Let the light be, and there was light. Let the vegetation and animals be, and they emerged. Whenever we say to God, "let it be according to your word," we are participating, believe it or not, in a New Creation. The world is being made new again. Mary and Jesus both said "let it be." Maybe that is why they are called the New Eve and the New Adam.

What will happen when we are able to say to God, "let it be" in our own lives? What will happen is that we will move from admiring our own work, our own cedar houses, to standing in awe at the wonder of what God has always been doing in us and through us. We will realize the 50-50 agreement of our youth was an illusion. Wonder will take hold of us, and grace will fill in all the gaps of our broken, secret deals we concocted with God.

***Several years before his death, a remarkable rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, suffered a near-fatal heart attack. His closest male friend was at his bedside. Heschel was so weak he was only able to whisper. "Sam," he said, "I feel only gratitude for my life, for every moment that I have lived. I am ready to go. I have seen so many miracles during my lifetime." The old rabbi was exhausted by his effort to speak. After a long pause, he said, "Never, once in my life, did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and He gave it to me."***

It was never 50-50; it was always 100-0. Thank God.

***Fr. Phil***