

Homily - December 24, 2023, Fourth Sunday of Advent



At every Eucharistic celebration you have ever participated in, you heard the priest say during the Eucharistic Prayer, ***“The Mystery of faith.”*** “Mystery” refers to God’s eternally conceived but hidden plan. In other words, God had, and still has, a plan, a purpose in mind for everything and everyone, including you. That plan, that Mystery, is not given in a single moment, but it unfolds over time, a long period of time. We couldn’t handle the entire mystery of our faith in one shot; it would be too overwhelming. So, it’s revealed

to us little by little, generation to generation. Each generation, seemingly, gets one more piece of the puzzle. Since it is the Mystery of faith, it implies that faith is the key to entering into that Mystery. Always give thanks for the faith you have, even if it’s only the size of a mustard seed; it’s your key to unlocking the Mystery.

In the world of faith nothing is given in advance. Nothing, apart from the love of God, is set in stone. And I can tell you from personal experience, my faith has gone sideways more than it has gone in a straight line. But even when it goes sideways, God is still there with words of encouragement. This plan of God, this Mystery of faith, St. Paul tells us, in that second reading to the Romans, ***“was kept secret for so long but is made known to not only the Jews but to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, as well.”*** This Mystery is meant to be good news to the whole world. Who will reveal this Mystery to us? Who will come down from the heavens and put the pieces of the puzzle together for us? Who will reveal the mind of God to us? Obviously, the answer is Jesus. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God and of God’s plan for humanity. To say, “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is Risen” or “Jesus has brought the world salvation” or “Jesus has conquered death forever” is all true, but it won’t help us grow in faith. All those statements are conclusions. They are the revelation but not the path to the revelation. We are meant to walk the path

of revelation and not just know it in our head. Let's look at two people, King David, whom we heard from in that first reading, and Mary in today's gospel. Maybe their journeys of faith can help us on our journey.

King David, Israel's greatest and most revered king, lived and reigned about 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus. From the Book of Samuel, we heard that after much turbulence and struggle, King David is not only settled in Israel but also settled in his house made of cedar. God has been good to David, and David feels it's time to repay the favor. Most assuredly, King David is feeling a twinge of guilt. He's living in a house of cedar while the ark of God is staying in a tent. The ark of God, sometimes called the Ark of the Covenant, was the container that housed the Ten Commandment.

The Ten Commandments were written by the hand of God and given to Moses and the Hebrews as a covenant between God and them. They believed that where the Ark of the Covenant was there God was as well. King David felt guilty that the presence of God was housed in a mere tent for the past 300 years. His plan was to build God a proper house. He tells the prophet Nathan about his plans to build God a house, to which Nathan responded, "Go for it." That same night God comes to Nathan in a dream and says, "Nathan, you shouldn't have told King David to go ahead and build me a house. I want you to go back and tell David something else. Tell David the tent is fine; I got used to the musty smell over the past 300 years, but it's fine. Tell David that when he was a shepherd boy, I stayed in a tent and was happy to go wherever he went. Tell David that I journeyed with the Hebrew people through the desert, I brought them safely to the Promised Land, I appointed judges to rule them. I stayed in a tent then and was happy to go wherever they went. Tell David, I will make of him a great king; I will make *him* into a house. In fact, from his very body, from his offspring I will establish a kingdom that will last forever."

As long as there are people on faith journeys, including us, God has no intention of being solitary, entrenched, or nailed down in one place. God will go wherever our faith journeys take us, even and especially when our journeys go sideways.

Perhaps David's offer to build God a house did come from guilt, but it probably also came from a sincere place within him. The prophet Nathan had to remind David that God cannot be domesticated, tamed, or relegated to a sanctuary. The emphasis in this story is on what this lively, vigorous, energetic God was doing to unsettle David rather than on what David was doing to settle God. The lesson was, unfortunately, lost. King Solomon succeeds his father, David, becomes king, and builds a Temple. He put the Ark of the Covenant into a room called the Holy of Holies. Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, was the high priest allowed to enter this room. The Jewish people had no access to it as they were considered unworthy. So much for journeying with God's people. The people had to come to God only to find out the door was locked.

There is another response to God wanting to build a house among us; it comes in the form of Mary. When the angel Gabriel approaches her, like David 1,000 years prior, she thinks she must do something for God. The first assumption is that Mary must initiate the conception. She thinks she has to do something to give birth to the Son of the Most High. The angel tells her the contrary. She must let something happen to her. What she must let happen is the descent of the Holy Spirit. When she opens herself to the power of the Most High, new possibilities of life will emerge. This is not a passive posture on Mary's part as you have often seen depicted in Renaissance paintings. In those paintings, Mary is wearing a halo, pudgy cherubs are floating around, and there is an open window showing a Tuscan landscape. Don't think that way. Mary is not passive at all. Mary's "yes" to the angel is a creative act of coinciding with the power of the Divine. Unlike King David, Mary gets it right. She realizes it's not what she can do for God, but it's what God wants to do in her that is important.

Being a typical Jewish girl, I can't think of anything that could have prepared Mary for the angel's message. She was young, uneducated and probably fearful of the "scandal" which was about to erupt. Nothing said at the synagogue would have prepared her or Joseph for this situation. Perhaps theology itself is not the path to the Mystery, but simply integrity and courage. Both Mary and Joseph had to rely on their angels! There's no mention in the Gospels of Mary and Joseph checking

out their inner experiences with the high priest, the synagogue or even their Jewish Scriptures. Mary and Joseph walked in courage and blind faith that their experience was true, with no one to reassure them they were right. Their only safety net was God's love and mercy, a safety net they must have tried out many times, or else they would never have been able to fall into it so gracefully.

Yes, grace. You can put an equal sign between the word "grace" and "gift." Like a gift, grace come to us freely. If we had to earn it, work for it, or deserve it, it wouldn't be a gift; it wouldn't be grace. God always takes the initiative in our lives. All God wants us to do is to respond like Mary did and say "yes." Mary let the impossible become possible. She let the inconceivable be conceivable. She let the uncontainable be contained in the fruit of her womb.

Do the same, and the Mystery of faith will be revealed through you.

~Fr. Phil