

**Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B
December 24, 2023**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Our first Mass of Christmas will begin less than six hours from now. This is the shortest time possible between the Fourth Sunday of Advent and the start of the Christmas season. Although the secular world has been well into the holiday season for weeks and will consider it ended after tomorrow, we are still in our Advent mode of anticipating and preparing for Christmas.

Thus, our Gospel passage today is Saint Luke's account of the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce that she had been chosen to be the mother of our Redeemer (Lk 1:26-38). The Gospels were written in Greek, so Saint Luke says that Gabriel's first word on coming to Mary was *chaire*, Greek for "rejoice!" Neither the Latin *Ave* nor the English *Hail* quite carry the

connotation of wishing someone happiness or joyful well-being. Our English word “cheer” comes from this Greek word, *chaire*, and I suspect the Italian greeting *ciao* stems from this word as well.

So we should hear Gabriel’s greeting not just as “Hi there, Mary,” as we might say in English to greet someone, but more like, “Be cheerful, Mary, for I have some good news for you!” Gabriel quickly adds, “Do not be afraid,” for any encounter with the divine leads to awe, surprise, or uncertainty – as was the case here for Mary.

Then the angel announces his good news with these words:

*Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

From the beginning of Advent, into our Christmas celebrations, and finally into the living-out of the Christmas message in the year ahead, we could not do better than turn to our Blessed Lady to show us how to live as good Christians.

In the days before Jesus' birth, people generally acknowledged God's almighty power. A prophet like Isaiah could picture God holding the whole world in his hands and encompassing the heavens with an outstretched palm. But even Isaiah could never have begun to imagine what we celebrate at Christmastime - this same God coming to live among us as one of us - coming as a tiny baby, a bundle of weakness and helplessness and, after dying in shame on a wooden cross, rising from the dead and ascending to heaven.

He comes into our world, just as we did, by being born of a woman. Without a woman's cooperation, there would have been no incarnation. Without Mary's cooperation, there would be no Christmas. It is that thought that leads many people, even small children, to try to reflect her love by practical acts of kindness to their sisters and brothers.

If we take time, or better, *make* time - even just a few minutes each day in this often hectic period - to recall how Mary treasured and pondered "these things" in her heart, we too will ponder them, and come to appreciate why the wonder of Christ's birth - even at the end of a difficult year like 2023 - calls for celebration, for rejoicing, and for

gentle, loving wonder, in the company of Mary. It is she who best teaches us how to love Jesus; it is she who shows us, despite our littleness, to love Jesus as she did by making Him the center of our lives.

Saint Luke's narrative of the Annunciation is the same Gospel passage that we had earlier in the week on Wednesday, December 20th. The Office of Readings for that day was from a homily "In Praise of the Virgin Mother" by Saint Bernard, in which he reflected on this great event. Clergy read this Office of Readings as part of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Divine Office that we promise to pray every day as part of our clerical duty, but most lay people may not be familiar with it, so I would like to share portions of it with you this morning.

What is creative and clever about St. Bernard's approach is that he puts himself, and us, in the scene as if we were there in the same room with Mary when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her. So he speaks to her:

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is

time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us. . . .

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Now, the tone of St. Bernard's words become more urgent, as you can almost hear him pleading with Mary:

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If he should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving.

Then, the climax, as the passage ends with Mary's words:

*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word.*¹

May we thank God for this grace. Amen.

¹ Hom. 4:8-9; *Opera omnia*, Edit Cisterc 4. [1966], 53-54.