

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Have a lighted candle as part of your Advent environment.

LEADER: What do I bring with me today that seems impossible to do?

ALL: What asks life and energy from me that I might not have to give? *Reflect quietly.*

LEADER: I invite us to pass this lighted candle to one another and, as we each in turn hold it, to name an impossibility we bring with us today, one we are willing to share with the group. *Group members pass the light.*

LEADER: God, your eternal Word took flesh in the world when a girl named Mary, still a virgin, placed her life at the service of your vision for us all.

ALL: Help us hear in her call our own call to give life to the world. Amen.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

The last words the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary in Sunday's gospel echo God's words to Sarah, Mary's earliest foremother in faith—"Nothing is impossible with God." Sarah and her husband, Abraham, wait into old age for the son that will fulfill God's promise. "Go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation....In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12.1-3).

Sarah is well past menopause when she overhears three strangers whom Abraham has welcomed into their tent promise she will finally have a son. She laughs aloud. The strangers vanish when she laughs, and God speaks in their place. "Why did Sarah laugh?" God asks Abraham (18.14). "Is anything too wonderful for the Creator?"

Sarah denies she laughed, but God says, "Oh yes, you did laugh." When the child of the old couple's



lifelong faith is born, they name him Isaac, which means in Hebrew *laughter of God*.

Israel's faith begins with waiting for a child. In Sarah God does the impossible in a woman too old to conceive. In Mary God does the impossible in a woman too young, a girl who does not yet have a husband.

● What are you too old for God to do in you?

● What are you too young for God to make happen through you?



GOSPEL

Mary agrees to be God's servant.

NARRATOR: The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David. The girl's name was Mary.

GABRIEL: Greetings, favored one. God is with you.

NARRATOR: Mary was much perplexed by the angel's words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

GABRIEL: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give him the throne of David, his father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever. His reign will have no end.



Artist/Gertrud Mueller Nelson

MARY: How will this be since I am a virgin?

GABRIEL: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so that your child will be holy and called the Son of God. Now Elizabeth, your kinswoman, has conceived a child in her old age. She who was barren is in her sixth month. Nothing is impossible with God.

MARY: I am God's servant. Let it happen to me as you say.

NARRATOR: Then the angel left her.

Luke 1.26-38

mouth (1.6-10). Moses questions, "Who am I to go to the Pharaoh of Egypt?" God assures him, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3).

Mary's call fits the biblical pattern. "How will I conceive a child since I know no man?" Gabriel assures Mary God will do this in her. The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that in the beginning hovered over the chaos, will come upon Mary. The Most High, often imaged as a cloud in Israel's history, will overshadow her. God in the image of a cloud led Israel through the desert and settled upon the meeting tent to dwell among the people.

How do clouds and spirit impregnate? These are images of God's creative power making the impossible come to be. Words cannot capture religious experience. Words can only describe spiritual experience after the fact or evoke it in metaphors as the images of cloud and spirit do.

In Mary, the Most High will overshadow and dwell in a human person, intensifying God's presence among us. No longer will God tent among Israel's tents and dwell in a house among Israel's homes, but God will become human, one of us and one with us. How can this be? This same God who created all that is will make the impossible come to be in Mary.

The becoming human of God will happen in Mary's womb. She will feel the first stirrings of salvation within her own self. God's Son will look

Nothing is impossible with God.

Mary, whose own womb and body become home to God, has least to say in the annunciation story. Three times Gabriel, God's messenger, speaks to her. Each time she responds.

To the angel's greeting, she responds with wordless perplexity. To Gabriel's invitation to give birth to God's Son, Mary questions, "How can this be?" To Gabriel's promise that God will do the impossible in her, Mary says yes.

This dialog between Gabriel and Mary outlines the journey in any call. The journey moves from perplexity, to certainty the call cannot be, to confidence this call can be. God can do the impossible in me.

God initiates calls. Mary is not the only person who sees problems with a mission God envisions. Jeremiah objects, "I do not know what to speak, for I am only a boy." God assures him, "I am with you," and puts words in Jeremiah's

like her. She will nurse and rock him after he is born.

With Mary's yes to God's invitation to be Jesus' mother, the Creator makes a new move, a move to make us whole. Mary is to name her son Jesus. The name means *he saves*.

- How is Mary's call like your own?

- Three artists illustrate the annunciation in this issue. Look at each illustration. What do you see? How does each artist bring the gospel to life? Chinese artist He Qi uses the flute to picture Mary at prayer. Flute music purifies like burning incense or sweet grass.

Catholics honor Mary with the title *Blessed Virgin*. This solemn, theologically important title hides from us that our more common name for virgin is *girl*. Mary is young, probably a teenager when she accepts God's call. The wholehearted yes of a teenager helps reveal the mystery hidden through the ages. She will have the baby for whom the world has been waiting.

Luke contrasts Mary's response to God's call with how Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, responds in the call story that immediately precedes her own. Zechariah cannot believe that his prayers for a child will be answered. He cannot believe that he and Elizabeth will, like Abraham and Sarah, have a child in their old age. He doubts rather than objects.

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- What organizations in your area serve single moms? How might you or your group help the organization?
- Explore what United Nation's goal 3 says about women and baby's health worldwide at "Sustainable Development Goals."
- Explore how UNICEF USA fights famine at: unicefusa.org.

Gabriel makes Zechariah unable to speak until John is born. For nine months he can only watch God's promise swelling in his wife's womb.

God does the impossible in a girl too young to be sexually active and in a couple too old to believe they will have a child.

- Imagine your own response to someone greeting you, "Hello, holy, favored one. God is with you."

- How did you respond to God in your teen years? What or whom did you embrace with youthful enthusiasm?

Much of the annunciation story focuses on who Mary's baby will be. His credentials in this infancy narrative are the same titles that get him crucified in the final chapters of the gospel. He is the messiah, the Son of the Most High, the son of David. As the messiah, Jesus restores David's house and reign but with a spiritual rule that will never end.

Mary represents the poor. In her *Magnificat*, which we prayed as last Sunday's responsorial, Mary blesses God for showing mercy to her people, for raising up the poor, for filling the hungry. In her yes, she trusts God's promises to her people and to her.

- What is Mary's importance in your life?



God establishes the house of David.

House has three meanings in Sunday's first reading—*palace, temple, royal family*. When David becomes king, he captures Jerusalem, makes it his capital, and builds a palace for himself. Then David thinks he should also build a house for the Ark of God—a temple.

In this passage God's interest is not in either the palace or temple but in the third kind of house—a royal dynasty to rule Israel. Through the prophet Nathan, God promises David that his throne and kingdom will stand forever. The story makes clear that David is great for the same reason as Mary. God was with him.

God's promise to David

When King David was settled in his house, and God had given him rest from his enemies on every side, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!" Nathan answered the king, "Go, do whatever you have in mind, for God is with you." But that night God spoke to Nathan and said: "Go, tell my servant David, Thus says the Holy One: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?

"I took you from the pasture, from caring for sheep, to be commander of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed

all your enemies before you. And I will make you a great name like the great ones of the earth. I will fix a place for my people Israel and plant them so that they may dwell in their place and be disturbed no more. Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old, since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel. I will give you rest from all your enemies. The Lord also reveals to you that the Lord will establish a house for you.

"When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

"Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever."

2 Samuel 7.1-5, 8-12, 14-16

David's house is Israel's royal line that rules the southern kingdom of Judah for nearly 500 years, beginning about 1,000 B.C. Most kings from this line failed to trust God to be with them, leading God's prophets to envision a greater king who would be Emmanuel, which means *God-with-us*.

Isaiah imagines the royal family tree of David's descendants as a dead stump and the king who would fulfill God's promise to David as a new shoot or root. The prophets trust God's faithfulness. Jesus fulfills God's promise to establish a lasting reign in those the Spirit animates and unites in faith.

- What promise do you see in those who share the limb of your family tree?
- What Christian practices do you inherit from the way your ancestors lived?

PRAY

Add to the following litany to Mary.

LEADER: Mary, receiver of God's impregnating Word.

ALL: God is with you and with us.

LEADER: Mary, swelling with God's promise.

ALL: God is with you and with us.

Continue the litany pattern.

Mary, full of grace and youth.

Mary, willing to give birth.

Mary, believer in all God can do.

Mary, first home of the savior.

Mary, unwed and widowed mother.

Mary, cause of our joy.

LEADER: Let us pray with Pope Francis at the end of Joy of the Gospel:

ALL: Mary, Virgin and Mother, you welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: help us say yes to the urgent call to proclaim the good news of Jesus.



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