

Feast of the Immaculate Conception 2015, Middleburgh

1st Reading: Genesis 3:9-15, 20 - *I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.*

Responsorial Psalm 98 "Sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous deeds."

2nd Reading: Ephesians 1:3-12 – *God has blessed us who first hoped in Christ*

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 - *Nothing will be impossible with God.*



♪ Loving & forgiving are you, O Lord; slow to anger rich in *mercy*,
loving & forgiving are you. ♪

The words are from Psalm 103. You may have noticed that I changed one of the words in the song in your hymnals. I changed the word "kindness" to "mercy," because that is one of the meanings of the Hebrew word in the Psalm. That word, both in Hebrew and Greek, can also mean "compassion."

The literal meaning of that word - Rahamim in Hebrew, Rechem in Greek, is "*womb-love*," the kind of love a mother would have for her child. I chose that psalm because today is the first day of the **Jubilee Year of Mercy**, proclaimed by Pope Francis.

The motto he has chosen for this Holy Year is "Merciful like the Father"

Today we remember the gift of Mercy and compassion that prepared Mary to say "Yes" to the angel Gabriel. That was the moment of the conception of Jesus in her womb, but when we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception, we are celebrating the conception of Mary in her mother, Anna's, womb. We are remembering the grace given to Mary when God blessed her before she was born.

That gift is the same one we receive **after** we are born - when we are baptized.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, which we heard as the 2nd reading today, Paul writes:
"God chose us in Christ to live a pure and holy life, to be full of love... the Father chose us to be adopted sons & daughters... By Christ's blood we were redeemed, our sins forgiven through extravagant love, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us. God freely displayed the mystery of what was always intended in Christ: a plan for the fullness of time to unite the entire universe through Christ."

God's plan was to reverse the consequences of the story in the 1st reading, from Genesis. Notice how Adam separates himself from Eve, blaming her for the problem. Then Eve separates herself from creation itself, blaming the snake. And both of them separate themselves from God and their own true identity as beloved children of God by refusing to do what God has commanded them. We suffer to this day from those three areas of separation. But God wants to reveal our deep connection with Christ, with each other and with the earth itself.

Mary's "yes" in the Gospel today reverses the individual and collective "no" to God described in the reading from Genesis. In a way, this feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrates our faith that **grace is more original than sin.**

The Gospel passage is a description of how Miriam of Nazareth heard the Word of God and kept it. The pattern is one that is common to most Biblical stories where God calls someone.

You can see it in the stories of Samson, of Samuel, & of John the Baptist & many others.

There are 5 parts: 1. An angel messenger. 2. Fear. [Eli Wiesel once said, "*Whenever an angel says 'Be not afraid!' you'd better start worrying. A big assignment is on the way.*"] -

3. The Announcement. 4. An objection. 5. Reassurance and a sign of God's power.

In this story, however, there is a sixth piece, which is **unique** to Mary -

She says, "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord...*"

She gives her direct verbal consent

That piece does not occur in 27 OT commissionings, or in 24 NT call stories.

Mary's "Yes" to the angel was about her choice to cooperate with the God who gave her the grace she received at her conception. And it was about her faith that "*Nothing is impossible with God.*"

When I hear those words - which occur in several parts of the Bible - my hope grows and I can feel joy even in the most difficult times. I hear them not only as, "Nothing is impossible for God to do:" I hear them as saying to me, "Nothing is impossible for you when you are with God and following the way of love and mercy that Jesus lived."

Pope Francis writes that to be merciful like the Father is a program of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace.

Mary heard the call to be an instrument of mercy because she had first received mercy from God.

And so, "*her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh.*"

In 1944, Caryll Houselander wrote a book about Mary called "The Reed of God"
In it there is a wonderful poetic story about Mary's active "yes" to God's promise.
I would like to ask Sr. Anna to tell that story because it seems right to hear it in a woman's voice.

THE REED

Outside the city in a marsh near the river grew a reed. She had lived in a green and yellow marsh all her life, and was happy. When it rained, she thanked God. When the sun seared the marsh, she thanked God too (though not so loudly as before). She knew that although it scorched her outside and hurt inside, her roots were digging into rich soil. But most of her days were like yours or mine... sunny, overcast, windy or drizzly.

One day (I'm not sure of the exact day) the Son of God walked through the marsh. He liked it out there, away from the noise of the city. He saw the speckled reed and stooped to look at it. It wasn't that she was particularly beautiful, but the Son of God needed a reed to pipe on, and with a little "fixing up" the reed would make a suitable instrument for her God. He studied the reed and finally said, "Little reed, I need a pipe to play a melody. Will you let me pull you up by the roots? I can fix you for my purpose, and that may hurt, but I wish to sing love through you."

The little reed could hardly believe what the Son of God was saying to her. But then, strangely enough, with no hesitation she cried, "Yes, yes. Let it be done!"

And so Christ pulled the reed up by the roots. It was true... it did hurt, but love made it worthwhile. She lay in His hands and didn't cry. Even when the Son of God whittled her the way He wanted her, even when He took his knife and cut away her throbbing roots, she just wiped away a little tear that slipped down her cheek. "Yes, yes, let it be done!" And the Son of God whittled her to fit His palm and emptied the clutter in her heart, and when she was virgin, hollow, empty, the Son of God kissed her and uttered through the reed a beautiful song of love.

That beautiful song is what we sing at Christmas.

It is what we sing as we celebrate the continuing presence of Jesus in our lives.

It is what we sing as we celebrate the death and rising of Christ at Mass.

It is what we sing when we say our own "yes" to God at each particular stage of our lives.

It is what we sing when we let ourselves be God's instrument, not by our own strength, but when we allow the breath of the Holy Spirit to move through us

with the same grace given to Mary at her very conception. So we pray with her:

♪ *I say "Yes" my Lord, in all the good times, through all the bad times.
I say "Yes" my Lord, to every word you speak.* ♪