

Homily for December 8, 2009

Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Sacred Heart, Margaretville/St. Ann's, Andes NY

1st Reading: Genesis 3:9-15, 20 [Eve became the mother of all the living]

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 98 [Sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done great things for us]

2nd Reading: Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 [God chose us as adopted daughters & sons]

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 [Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you]

♪ Oseh shalom bim-ro-mav, hu ya-a-seh shalom aleinu,
V'al kol yisrael, v'im-ru, im-ru amein. Ya-seh shalom, ya-seh shalom,
Shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael. Ya-seh shalom, ya-seh shalom,
Shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael ♪

That is a song Mary knew from the Synagogue - Jesus sang it too: I learned it when I was asked to be a cantor at a bar mitzvah by the teen aged son of two good friends. [his father was president of the Synagogue]. The translation in the prayer book there is:

"May the one who makes peace reign in the heavens, send peace to us, to all Israel and to the whole world."

But when I asked a cantor at another synagogue if that was the exact meaning of the Hebrew words, he told me that the *real meaning* was slightly different. Literally, the words mean "*The One who makes peace reign in the heavens SENDS peace to us, to all Israel and to the whole world.*"

It is more of a *proclamation* than a petition. It is, really, a prophesy of the Incarnation, the birth of the Messiah into the world.

Peace, shalom is one of Christ's names, Isaiah calls the messiah the "Prince of Peace" and St. Paul writes simply, "He is our peace." Shalom is God's gift to Mary. It was given even before the angel said, "Hail Mary" in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke.

Mary accepts that gift, gives birth to Jesus, and gives the gift of peace to us. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. Today we remember the gift that prepared Mary to say "yes."

The gift given to Mary by grace, the gift we call the *Immaculate Conception*, is when God blessed her before she was born, when *she* was conceived in her mother, Anna's, womb.

That gift is the same one *we* receive **after** we are born, when we are baptized. In the Letter to the Ephesians, today's 2nd reading, Paul writes: "God chose us to be holy and blameless ... to be adopted sons & daughters of our God."

For me to understand the Immaculate Conception, I find it helps to understand sin, especially as it is described in the first reading from Genesis, as *singular* as well as plural. Mary was preserved from *sin* from her conception, before it was possible for her to commit *sins*.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan spiritual writer, gives a good explanation:

"The *real* evil in the world is not primarily the personal sins that you and I commit. Rather, it is a whole climate that envelops us. The Scriptures... often speak of sin in the singular, not in the plural. Sin is a total reality that we get trapped in."

We are set free from sin in that sense when we are baptized. For most Christians that happens before we can be guilty of personal sins.

Notice that we hear almost the same words at Mass that the Angel said to Mary, "The Lord be with you". If we believe in God's power to save us, that really means "The Lord *is* with you." I often pray the Hail Mary as if it were addressed to me, after praying it in the traditional way, "Hail, Peter, full of grace through God's gift, the Lord is with you."

Our call is to be like Mary, to give birth to Christ in our world.

Mary was an evangelist by the way she said yes to God when she was a teen-ager, and the way she lived the rest of her life.---We are all called to be evangelists like her!

Sr. Anna, who works with me as part of the Franciscan Ministry of the Word at Bethany Ministries, once had to face the question: What does it mean to be an evangelist? As Director of Evangelization for the Albany Diocese, she had to figure out how to explain what Pope John Paul II meant when he said, "*We are all called to be evangelists.*"

It is not just the name of the Albany Diocesan newspaper, neither does it mean that we have to stand on a soap box at street corners. She thought of what she would say to first graders, since she had taught them for 19 years. If she could explain it to a 7 or 8 year old, she could explain it to herself. This is what she came up with:

*To be an evangelist is to make a **v e r b** of the "Good News"*

That's what an evangelist is --someone who "Good-News-es" others, someone who spreads the Gospel by living the way Jesus did.

Mary was an evangelist by the way she lived her life: "*May it be done to me according to your word*"

My mother, Teresa, was an evangelist, although she would throw something if I said it to her while she was alive. She used to take care of the people at the apartment complex where she lived - helping one to figure out how to use a checkbook, connecting another with meals on wheels. She used to send me to minister to relatives and friends who were sick or dying, sometimes going with him.

I will never forget the day she told me I had to visit my godmother, Isabelle, on a day when I really did not have the energy to do it. My mother was insistent, and I listened. The next day my godmother died. I am so happy I listened to my mother, and that she "good-newsed" me by her concern for a person we both loved.

We hear the words at every Mass, "Do this in memory of me"

We need to hear them in a new way.

They don't just mean to celebrate Mass again.

Jesus is really saying:

Love one another as I have loved you - do THIS in memory of me!

Forgive one another as I have forgiven you - do THIS in memory of me.

*Give peace and healing to one another as I have given them to you
do THIS in memory of me*

!

This is how we wait in joyful hope, this is how we prepare the way of the Lord.

Let us sing with Mary, as we prepare for the feast of the birth of her son: [# 36 verses 1 & 7]

♪ O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all humankind;

Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our Prince of Peace.

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel. ♪