

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year C  
(Dec. 23, 2012)**

***The Perfect Disciple***

This is one of my favorite stories from Luke's Gospel, along with the story of the Annunciation that precedes it – not just because they are beautiful stories but also because they tell us so much about Mary – much that can be very meaningful to us.

It's important to understand that in these stories Mary shows herself to be not only the handmaid of the Lord, not only the Mother of Jesus and the Mother of God as we believe, but also the perfect disciple. We see this in what she says and does. First of all in the Annunciation scene, she hears the Word of God; she listens carefully, ponders it, and then fully and unreservedly accepts it. The Word becomes flesh in her womb, the mighty, immense creator of all becomes so tiny that no one of his creatures could even see his physical presence, however real it might be. But Mary knows that He is there. And her perfect discipleship moves her from being just a hearer of the Word to being a doer of the Word.

She has been told that her cousin, Elizabeth, is also with child. She has to know, that like her own pregnancy, Elizabeth's is also somewhat irregular since Elizabeth is old, far past child-bearing age, and even when she was younger she was sterile and could not have children. It's another miracle from an all powerful God, for whom all things are possible.

So Mary sets out for that long and difficult and even dangerous walk from her home in Galilee to the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah near Jerusalem.

Now the traditional interpretation is that she is going to help her elderly cousin in what can only be a difficult situation for her. No sooner does the Word of God become flesh in her womb than she is moved to go to the aid of someone in need. Once again it's the mark of a good disciple. And I like to think that as she walked along those many miles she smiled thinking of the mystery she was carrying within her. I also like to think that Jesus was receiving his first lessons in what would become for him a way of life: helping those who needed help.

But beyond that from a very human perspective we might say that Mary is going to Elizabeth because she herself is in need of help at this most crucial moment in her life. Here she is, unmarried, yet pregnant. She is however betrothed to Joseph. By Jewish law she seemingly has committed adultery and the punishment for that is death. There is, after all, a human perspective here. Mary was seeking support from another pregnant woman, an older, more mature person who could help her at this extraordinary moment in her life. After all, she could hardly tell her down-to-earth female friends in back-water Nazareth what had happened to her. Imagine her calling them together and saying, "Ladies, you'll be delighted to know that I have been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit."

Mary, pregnant with the all-holy, is not a confident, self assured, triumphant queen of heaven. She is young, perhaps an adolescent, confused when Gabriel leaves her without a script for the future, not quite knowing what to do next, even how to tell Joseph.

When Elizabeth greets her she calls her blessed, blessed because she has trusted that the Lord's word to her would be fulfilled. She trusted. She was a woman of faith. And here perhaps is where the story has meaning for us in our lives today.

How did Mary trust? In what did her faith consist? When the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him too not to be afraid, but that everything was in God's hands, the angel quoted the prophet Isaiah to say that the child born of Mary would be Emmanuel, that is, God is with us. And that is what Mary trusted. Her faith assured her that against all expectations in this situation God was with her.

Well, you know, we are a bit like Mary. God has not provided us with a full scenario of our lives. We are never entirely certain what the future will bring. We are still shocked by the terrible tragedy that the people Newtown, Conn., suffered a little over a week ago. They were totally unprepared for it. We can only pray that they will have the strength with God's help to bear up under this horrible experience and that their faith and trust in God will not diminish. We can only pray that, like Mary, they live in hope. Just as we all do, we live in hope. Our faith tells us that, no matter what, no matter what, God is with us. And that's where we put our trust.

The wonderful thing is that like Mary we too can be hearers and doers

of the word. We too can be disciples of the Lord, filled with the presence of God in our lives and going to the aid of those in need. We know that when we do that we are also going to the Christ who is present in them. That's our Advent attitude. Our coming to Christ. It's our response to his Christmas, to his coming to us.