

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Ready or not Christmas is coming.

In about six hours we will begin our Christmas celebration  
as we remember the birth of our Lord.

Today, as we do every year on the fourth Sunday of Advent,  
we remember the announcement,  
or the annunciation,  
of Christ's impending birth.

This year we hear the story from the Gospel of Luke,  
of the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary.

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Now I don't know about you,  
but that kind of a greeting would make me nervous,  
like when your supervisor walks up and says,  
"So, how's the bosses favorite doing today?"

You just know that the other shoe is going to drop.

I like that Luke includes that very real line,  
"But she was much perplexed by his words  
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

It lets us know that Mary is a real person, and no dummy either.

It's easy to forget that fact after all these years,  
after the rise of the cult of Mary,  
after all the prayers and paintings and songs.

In all the Roman Catholic churches,  
In all the Eastern Orthodox churches,  
and in many Episcopal churches for that matter,  
there is a separate altar or even a whole chapel dedicated to Mary.

So, what's the big deal?

Why all the fuss?

I know I don't really have to say much

to those of us who have come from the Roman  
or Orthodox branches of the church.

And I also know that those of us

who have come from the more reformed branches of the church  
may be getting a bit twitchy right now,  
but hang on.

We are all in this together,

and there is wisdom to share for all.

Why do some say Mary is so special?

Well, there are a lot of reasons, really,

some more legitimate than others,  
but they all began in the same place.

Today we heard about where it all began,

that Mary began as a regular,  
normal  
human being.

A young girl from the town of Nazareth (or maybe Bethlehem),

she had her life all planned out,

Or at least as planned out as any young girls life could be  
in first century Palestine.

She was engaged to be married to a good provider,

a craftsman,  
a carpenter who just happened to be from the House of David.

Though being from the house of David had an aura of honor about it,

it was really no big deal.

The number of people who could claim David as a forbear

could have easily numbered into the millions.

Still, it was nice.

She saw before her as good a life as one could expect  
in a small town under Roman occupation.

A good home among friends.

A husband to love and provide for her.

Children.

All in all it was really nothing special,

but it was her life.

Her dreams, I suspect, weren't all that different  
from any other young bride to be.

When it gets right down to it,  
she was just a normal person not all that different from you or me.

And then the angel came for a visit.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

A greeting to ponder indeed!

In this encounter that Mary has with the angel of God  
we see much more than a young girl in first century Palestine having a vision;  
we see the potential of our own encounters  
with the revealed will of God.

In Mary's response

we see much more than a young girl taking on the audacious role of God bearer,  
we see a model for our own behavior in response to the urgings of the Spirit.

In the face of an avalanche of fantastic declarations

Mary asks the angel Gabriel the obvious practical question,

“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

She doesn't ask how a man born in a small town

would rise to the throne of David.  
She doesn't ask how he will reign over the house of Jacob forever,  
or how his kingdom could possibly be without end.  
She doesn't even ask how the angel knows that a child not yet conceived,  
will be a boy.  
All these questions go un-asked,  
though I am sure they crossed her mind.  
And in Gabriel's answer,  
despite the outward calm her face always has  
in all the paintings of the Annunciation,  
I am sure she saw in her mind's eye  
with a rising sense of panic,  
all her plans come crashing down.  
"For nothing will be impossible with God."

And God had different plans.

When we receive a greeting from a messenger of God,  
nothing is ever the same again.  
These are the times when God's will doesn't always look like common sense.  
When a thousand questions flood our minds.  
When we are perplexed.  
If you ever find yourself in one of these times,  
and some day you very well just might.  
Remember Mary.  
Take the time to ponder the greeting you have received.  
Sift through the thousands of questions that come to mind  
and ask only the question that needs to be answered now.  
Have the courage to leave for tomorrow

the questions and prayers of tomorrow.  
Remember the gentle words of Gabriel,  
“Do not be afraid...For nothing will be impossible with God.”  
Mary was able to wait patiently for the divine possibilities  
that were about to grow out of the wreckage of her lost dreams.  
To leave them to God and to say,  
“Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.”  
That is why we remember her today on this the fourth Sunday of Advent.  
That is why she is a saint,  
and why she has been a constant help to Christians throughout the ages.  
That is why we make all the fuss.  
That is why Mary is special  
When you find yourself in the company of an angel  
who greets you in a most unsettling way,  
don't be afraid.  
And if you need a little help,  
go ahead and ask Mary.  
She knows.  
She's been there too.  
Hail Mary, Full of Grace.  
The Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners  
now and at the hour of our death.  
Amen.