

Sermon- December 18, 1988

In the name of God the Father-God the Son-and God the Holy Spirit. Amen

Advent as we heard is a time of preparation for Christmas, but sometimes the preparation doesn't go so smoothly, infact in my life right now the preparation for Christmas for my family is very disruptive. It reminds me of a cartoon that I read just last week, the cartoon strip is called 'Sally Forth' and over the last week or so Sally has been trying to convince her husband to assist in writing the Christmas cards and all the things that go along with that. And in the strip that I am thinking about particularly she has confronted him that he is really not doing much about getting ready for Christmas. He protests his innocence saying "whatever list you get me I go out and buy those things". And she says well I am not giving you a list this year! and he says "does that mean you are not going to tell me what I should get you?" So it relates to my own experience of preparing for Christmas in the family because most of my energy is focused on helping congregations and churches get ready for Christmas. The person who all of this gets dumped on for the family is my wife, and she is the one who has all the arrangements to make and all the lists to get. I have done exactly the same thing-dear you get the list and I will go out and buy whatever it is I am supposed to buy for whomever and tell me what it is before I meet them next time. And she gets pretty tired of this too.

But I would like to think today about someone who does an excellent job preparing for Christmas. Someone who's preparation for the Christ Child is an example for all of us, and I'm thinking now about the Blessed Virgin Mary, listen to this. "Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with me, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

The fourth Sunday of Advent is in many places known as Mary's Sunday because the gospel lesson every year has something about the annunciation the visitation as today. Something about the Blessed Virgin Mary preparing to give birth to the Christ Child. She is the example of faithful preparation for Christmas, and she reminds me of three types of preparation that we need to make or that there are to make for Christmas. The first one is the preparation of a people. Think of the people of God, the children of Israel, they were given the covenant when they came out of Egypt and escaped by the skin of their teeth. They wandered about in the wilderness out in the desert for many years. They were given a covenant to establish their relationship between them and God, and that covenant was sealed by the giving of the Law on stone tablets. The calling of the prophet was a

preparation of the coming of our Lord. They called the people to return to the Lord to care for widows, to orphans, for that wasn't being done. They called on the people to do justice, love, mercy, and most of all to walk humbly before God. They taught the people to wait for the Messiah and all the people it says in one of our gospels versions were on tippy toes of expectation. They were waiting for the Messiah who would translate the Law from hard tablets of stone into our hearts. To become a people bound by a communion-a common vision of the Lord. The second half of the magnificent which we read this morning deals with all those blessings upon the people of God when the Messiah comes.

The second type of preparation is that that we see in Mary as she prepared not the people of God, but as she prepares herself to bear the Son of God. As she prepares herself to bear Jesus. The most ancient title that we have for Mary is Theotokos, God Bearer. And now a lot of people get upset about that and they immediately think that you are doing something that you shouldn't be. But the scripture is quite clear, if Jesus is God and Man and Mary bore him as his mother then she is the bearer-the one who was chosen by God to carry the incarnate word. And she is worthy of the title God Bearer, not by her own merit but by God's grace in her. But most importantly the reason that we look upon her as a good example is because of her obedient yes to God's call to her. Be it unto me Lord according to thy word. When she bore the Christ Child she was bearing God into the world. She was giving her flesh so that God might tabernacle among God's people. Because of this Mary is the model in the Church for Evangelism. As she bore Jesus into the world her yes allowed God to touch the hearts of many people. She didn't do this by passing out tracts-she didn't do it by knocking on doors-she didn't do it by hiring a stadium and filling it with people and preaching at them-she did it through her obedience to what God called her to do in surrendering and receiving his gift.

Now picture that as Mary brought Christ into the midst of those people at that time. Imagine today that if we each became God Bearers bearing what we received from God out into the midst of the people whom we live with each day-whom we work with-we play with. Think about it instead of one God Bearer a hundred or a thousand sharing God with each one that they meet.

Now the third type of preparation is not to bear Jesus out into the world but to receive Jesus within. Mary is a model again of receiving Jesus. She

didn't seek out this role it wasn't like she put herself in a contest for Miss Bethlehem or Miss Nazareth and she won and therefore she got to bear Jesus. She was uncomfortable with the role because it scandalized her to her future husband, to people in her community, they could have put her to death. She didn't make it happen, she didn't orchestrate events so they would come around and finally somebody would finally ask her. She simply waited upon the Lord. She was spiritually aware enough to know God calling her when she heard it. Now this ability to listen to God is something that is naturally created in us. We spend a lot of time thinking about original sin and the brokenness that besets us, but its important at a time like this to realize that we are also created in God's image and we have his natural longing to be in communication with God and to hear God speaking to us. And you know how we know its natural? When Mary visited her cousin and greeted her the babe leaped within her. That infant just six months along in the pregnancy knew that this was someone that was touched by God and could feel the Holy Spirit working. That's how naturally receptive we are. But the tough part is that pretty soon after birth we begin to unlearn it and we begin to be more and more characterized by our brokenness and our sinfulness and we have to really work hard to listen to God.

The key for Mary and the key for us is receptiveness, listening but overall being willing to receive. Being willing to surrender the things that block and prevent us from listening to God, because God is seeking each one of us. God is knocking, God is asking, God is asking us to receive Jesus Christ. God is knocking on the Inn of our hearts looking to find shelter. God is seeking the simple vessel a vessel that God desires to fill with grace and peace. Now this offer is not subject to negotiation, the Angel Gabriel didn't say "well Mary here is what I would like you to work on", and she said "here is my counter proposal". She said Yes! She received. She pondered all of these things in her heart because you know what as special as the Blessed Virgin Mary was she didn't understand it all. She was responding on a level that was different that what her mind told her and so she pondered all of these events in her heart and treasured them and learned from them and fed on them. As a result she became a very unique vessel and gave flesh to God incarnate. How many said no? How many were called by God: and said No, No Way! How many

today when God knocks on the empty Inn looking to find room for his Holy Family, how many say no not today? How many times have you and I when we hear that knock said no not today I'm not interested.

Now I have presented these types of preparation in really reverse order. First of all we have to prepare to receive, that the first thing because thats how everything else gets started. Then we have to prepare to bear Christ out into the world. And finally the people out there the world the people who are not a part of us then they will begin to get prepared for Christmas for the coming of the Christ Child.

So the next time that you are flustrated you are fed up to here with all of Christmas's commercialism, with dancing reindeer, with specials in claimation on television or with Elvis singing the Little Drummer Boy, remember instead of worrying about those folks out there who don't know about Christmas and don't have the right attitude towards Christmas. Remember that God is seeking a simple vessel like Mary to receive him to bear his Son Jesus out into the world, and to transform the world that he created by the power of his Holy Spirit.

So instead of that prayer "Hail Mary" that I said at the beginning, lets change the words a little bit so its for something for each one of us. Hail Christian full of grace the Lord is with you-and in you-blessed are you-special set apart-called-blessed are you among all the people; and blessed in the fruit of your heart in Jesus Christ. Amen.