

## *Invitations*

The Conception of Mary + December 8, 2021  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
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*(After Adam had eaten of the tree,) ... the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals, and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." The man called his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. Genesis 3:9-15,20*

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38*

In this mass we commemorate and we aspire to worthily celebrate something about which we arguably know nothing. You likely noticed that none of the appointed Scripture readings mentions, describes, defines, explains, refers to, commends, questions, tells the story of or waxes eloquent about or even remotely, generally, or indirectly speculates about the conception of Mary, Immaculate or otherwise.

Mary's conception and the lovely story of her parents Anne and Joachim were first recorded in an account known as the Gospel of James, believed to have been written 150 years or more after the events described in it. Pope Innocent I condemned the Gospel of James early in the 6th century, but the story it includes about the conception of Mary remained and remains tenaciously influential in the formation of Marian piety. Without that Gospel of James we might not be here tonight.

With so little to go on, the preacher's job on this feast is uniquely challenging. Rather than commend or dispute the account in the Gospel of James and the few other similar accounts from even later centuries, and rather than commend or dispute the nature of Mary's conception, I prefer to commend three invitations that I believe may arise for us on this day.

Our first invitation, I believe, is to be *imaginative*. Even with so little reliable data, or maybe because of the lack, we can be playful in our wondering. We can be delighted to imagine that Jesus had grandparents. Think for a moment of the special names that many

children give to their grandmothers. Would you not like to hear, on his own lips as a child, the name by which Jesus called his grandmother?

And what of Mary's childhood, in the years before the Annunciation featured in today's gospel. If to her parents her conception was a miracle, as all conceptions are, how might that have uniquely shaped how she was known and treated, not only by her parents but other relatives and neighbors? How much backstory did Elizabeth already know when Mary later arrived on her doorstep? Even without answers to questions like these, our wondering may draw us closer in our devotion to the One who became flesh, through Mary, and dwelt among us.

In addition to being imaginative, we may be invited this day to be *thoughtful*. Doctrines about Mary, including the Immaculate Conception celebrated by Roman Catholics today, can be divisive. The thoughtful Anglican and Anglo-Catholic, I believe, is thoughtful about what beliefs should be placed on the essential list and which go onto the discretionary pile. To give one another leeway in discretionary beliefs often makes us better listeners, more thoughtful observers and listeners, allowing us to see past stated beliefs to the underlying and animating faith, hope and love, in ourselves and others.

Finally, in addition to being imaginative and thoughtful, we may be invited this day to be *contemplative*, to wonder, to expand and deepen our seeking and knowing. Notice how one of Mary's first responses to the greeting of the angel: she '*pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*'

We may or may not dispute or even care about the circumstances and the nature of and the parties to the conception of Mary. But we have little or no doubt that she was conceived. And as with all conceptions, hers signaled a beginning. And let's take note that the beginning of her story at conception is not the beginning of THE story, but that a critical, sorrowful chapter from the beginning, Genesis, is chosen as tonight's first reading. We partly commemorate the conception of Mary to provide a backstory to the Incarnation of Christ. And that backstory also has a backstory and partly explains it.

And if we can agree that Mary's beginning is shrouded in at least some obscurity, we may be led to contemplate the origins of our own faith. What backstory, moments, persons, hopes, decisions and miracles are known to us? And, as well, how much do we not know? And why? And would it matter to know more?

I've suggested three invitations that may arise by way of our commemoration of the conception of Mary: to be imaginative, to be thoughtful, and to be contemplative. At their best these invitations may open our hearts and prepare us in the event that an angel or a miracle comes our way, to start something new in us and in God's world? And when the moment comes, we may find ourselves saying, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" Amen.