

Following God's Lead

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Hello. My name is Father Nathan, and I'm honored to lead you in this Advent retreat. Let's begin with a prayer. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Come, O Holy Spirit, Father of the poor. Illumen our hearts and our minds. Come by the means of the powerful intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Lead us to the fullness of the truth. Saint John, pray for us. Saint Joseph, pray for us. Our Lady of the New Pentecost, pray for us. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

As we journey together this Advent, we try to understand what God is doing in our lives. Looking at the life of the Virgin Mary, and how God prepared her for Christmas during her Advent can help us to really see and understand God's fingerprints. And I say that on purpose, because as you discern in spiritual life, and as we grow spiritually, we have to be able to start to see the telltale signs of God's working. Just like we have to be able to look and say "This is how the evil one works," we also and even more have to see "This is how God works." Because what strikes me as amazing after my years of experience as a priest, as a shepherd of souls, is almost like how easy it is for us to be shocked by God. Shocked and even scandalized. Everything goes great for a while, and then God acts in a way that we weren't expecting, and that we weren't ready for, and so we just kind of want to chuck it. I don't know.

We get a priest in our life, and we find that we really like him, and he's wonderful, and then we feel like he's emotionally manipulative, right. Or he's really distant, and very busy. And so then we kind of, like, fall, or we have an experience of a parish that lets us down. "The Youth Group was no good," or "The building committee people were snobby to me," right. Or "We tried to volunteer to be the money counter, and father has his little favorites for the money counters, and they won't let anyone in. Even though I love counting money I wasn't allowed in." You can think of all kinds of scenarios where what happens is that our life kind of hits these bumps, and we don't expect them. And so we get scandalized, frustrated, and we quit. We give up. We say "It wasn't for me."

And then usually, if we're honest with ourselves, as we should be just in all humility, right, we kind of point fingers, and we're like "It's the priest's fault. It's the pope's fault. It's the altar boy's fault. It's never my fault." We'll even blame God, right. We'll say it's God's fault. "God, why did You do this to me?" You know, "It shouldn't have been this way." And actually, where that comes from, my friends, is that it comes that way because we haven't learned well enough, and haven't been maybe taught well enough by our shepherds how to see the way that God leads us, and how to prepare ourselves for that way. Because the way that He

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leads us is usually not the same as we would spontaneously want to be led. And we just have to start to look at that.

So how does God lead? We take a look at the Virgin Mary, and we can start to understand a lot more about how God leads us. How did He lead her to prepare for Advent? Well, I think He did by increasing her thirst. We should never be afraid of thirst in our spiritual life, desires. And sometimes He gives us a lot of hardships, or even puts us back in our... makes us be patient with things, just so that those desires become bigger and stronger with us, and that's exactly He did to Mary. He made her wait, and the long expectancy of Israel, and then wait for 16 years of her life, or however old she was at the moment of The Annunciation, and then wait again for 9 months until He finally came. And then He made her wait for 30 years after that before actually starting His Public Ministry. And then He made her wait 3 more years, then He made her wait 3 whole days in the tomb until finally His resurrection glory shines over the earth. That's a lot of waiting.

And it's funny, because there's a line from Padre that makes me think of, where someone came to him and said "Padre Pio, I've been praying for 20 years for this something, and it still hasn't happened. So I'm beginning to lose hope." And Padre Pio looked at the person and said "Ah, my friend, I've been praying for some things for 20 years, and so I'm starting to have hope." It's a little twist there.

The second way that God prepared Mary for the first Christmas was by inviting her to choose obedience, and to choose the way that was most pleasing for Him to love. She chose to be obedient to Joseph, just as Joseph chose to be obedient to Herod without any supernatural interventions on his part. Well, there's a third thing that God does to prepare Our Lady for this first birth, and that is the unexpected rejection. We know the story well, right. If you look at the Gospels of Saint Luke, we find that, you know, Joseph and Mary head down, and of course they're there, they arrive in Bethlehem. And getting into Bethlehem, the strangest things happen. But as they went to the inn, the place where travelers lodge, they are not accepted. And that's recounted in the Gospel of Matthew explicitly, and then here in Luke we find the same type of thing. Luke 7: ***She wrapped Him in the cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*** So a manger, of course, that word is from the French kind of roots, and it means the feeding trough. So she had to place the child where the animals fed, because there was no room for them in the inn.

You'd never think that God would lead us by rejection, but He led Mary by rejection, and He led Joseph by rejection. And then, guess what? When Jesus was on the earth, He was rejected. And yet when we get rejected, we say "This is it. I won't even belong to a religion that allows me to be rejected." Our kids go to school and they have problems with other kids, and our kids get rejected, and then we end up blaming God. And we say "There's no way. There's no room for this." Read what happens in The Bible to the Virgin Mary herself. God gave her

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one final preparation to be the mother of The Messiah, and it was that she's rejected.

Now why is that so significant? It's significant because by the rejection, Mary enters into a solitude with God that no one else can follow. The rejection enables her to be alone. Now, alone with whom? Alone with her husband. Alone with the Son of God, her Son. And that solitude must have been a marvelous intimacy, and I look at that rejection and I say to myself "For me, the real hero here is Saint Joseph." I mean, Saint Joseph wasn't immaculate – Mary was immaculate, Joseph was not – and there he was just rejected by his own kin. And if you think of what that must have represented: a young husband whose first child, life is being born, who also knows that that child is the Son of God, the angel told him that – ***"What has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit"*** – and so he knew that. So his righteousness, and his holiness, and his respect for God.

And then, to underscore this even more, Joseph went to Bethlehem to register because all of the sons of David had to register there in the hometown of David. That means that the people that rejected Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary were their own kin. It was their own family that rejected them. Joseph must have been so mortified, and so humiliated too because, again, this is his wife. I mean, what does he do? Fight? No, Joseph didn't fight. What does he do, make a scene? Joseph didn't make a scene. Joseph allowed himself to have that determination inside to accept whatever God gave him, and to make the best of it. He lays his child not on the ground, but in a manger, in what God gave of him. And God rewards that humility of Joseph and the humility of Mary by intimacy with Him.

Now, right away we can say "Well, this seems like a pithy tradeoff. I'd much rather have money, or I'd much rather have reputation." You'd much rather have a lot of things, right, but that's the whole point. God purifies us radically to the root from all of our attachments to everything else besides Him. And He does it oftentimes through rejection. If the Virgin Mary was rejected by her kinsfolk, if Saint Joseph was rejected by his kinsfolk, well maybe that's part of the way that God is also leading us. I'm not saying that we should strive for rejection by any means whatsoever, but what I am saying is that it's one of the signs of God to remind us that the real goal of our life is intimacy with Him, and intimacy with our family, and that our lives belong to Him and to Him alone as the first place.

And so yeah, sometimes we have to be willing. I mean, if you look at the lives of saints, I'm thinking of Saint Lawrence for example, that incredible Deacon. You know, he gave up absolutely everything in order to preserve Christ. When Rome was sacked by the barbarian tribes, they came to find him and they said "Okay Saint Lawrence, you're the treasurer of the church. We want you to give us all the treasures of the church." And Lawrence said "Okay, well give me a day and then I'll fill this room with all the treasures of the church." And they said "Okay Lawrence." And then they stormed off. And they came back, and they saw Lawrence again, and they said "Alright, give us the treasure." He says "You want

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to see the treasures?” And he opens up the door to the room, and in the room he had put all of the poor, the broken, the homeless, those who had no one else, and he said “These, my friends, are the treasures of the church.”

Now, I imagine, and maybe I’m wrong, that that moment Lawrence had a little chuckle to himself, right. But the barbarian folks, they were not exactly chuckling. They took Lawrence and they put him on a grill, and they grilled him to death. And as Lawrence is dying on the grill, he’s on one side of the grill, and of course the flames were underneath him, and he yells out to the executioners “Flip me over, I’m done on this side.” It’s a true story. I mean, he goes to his death laughing. And I think that’s amazing, because look at the solitude, look at the rejection, and look at Lawrence’s treasure. “I’m one with God.”

In our own lives, it’s a sign of God to remind us that nothing on this earth is worthy of our adoration except Him. And here, this is how God prepares him, and prepares Mary. And I just think it’s something for us to ponder, and to constantly stay close to in our hearts. God leads us, as He led Mary and Joseph, and He leads us through the cross to the cross, so that by the cross we can share in this light, and nothing is more important. This Advent, let it all go. Let yourself enter into a season of real penance. That’s why we wear purple. Of repentance, of rejection of sin, and of allurements and enticements that actually keep our soul at bay and keep us down. Allow yourself to be free again. If God is allowing you to experience His solitude, it’s not that you’d be lonely. Loneliness is not the goal. Solitude is so that you’ll be alone with Him, full of Him. And this is the gift that He gave firstly to Mary. As He was born from that rejection and through that rejection to give her intimacy with Him, alone, so He will also be born in and through your rejections to give you intimacy with Him. Bear everything with that joy that’s the heart of Mary, and be afraid of nothing. May God bless you this Advent, and may you have a very holy and deep Christmas, embracing Him who has come to embrace you. May God bless you.