

Having Great Hope in God's Love

Fr. Nathan Cromly

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Come Holy Spirit, Father of the poor, and loom in the hearts of Thy faithful and kindle in them the fire of Thy love. Send forth Thy spirit and they shall be created. Thou shalt renew the face of the earth. Let us pray. *O God, who did instruct the hearts of Thy faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant us in the same spirit to be truly wise and ever to rejoice in His consolation through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

My name is Father Nathan, and I am a member of the Congregation of St. John, the Brothers of St. John. I'm overjoyed to be able to lead you this Advent in some reflections to help you prepare for the coming of our Lord. There are so many beautiful things to do during Advent, from our traditions around the Advent wreath, to the Advent calendar, to buying gifts for those whom we love, to spending special time with Mary in prayer. And as we approach this feast, I want to suggest a very powerful way for you to prepare for Christmas, and that's by allowing God to prepare you for Christmas as He prepared Mary.

You think about it, the most care that God would have given to anyone during Advent spiritually would have been the soul and the heart of the Virgin Mary. How did she prepare for this great gift? How did God work His work of grace of preparation inside of her? By receiving His action in her soul as an example, we can also better maybe understand and identify the fingerprints of God in our own life as He works in our souls to prepare us.

If we look at scripture, and we read together from The Gospel According to Luke, we see that Mary's Advent, of course, begins at The Annunciation. ***In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, to a town of Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. And the Virgin's name was Mary.*** I love this right away, because it situates Mary's receiving Christ in a preparation that preceded hers. This Christmas, you're going to receive Jesus in a totally unique way. Why? We know this because every time we receive the Lord at Mass, it's a totally unique gift of love. And every time we celebrate a holiday in the liturgical cycle, the workings of grace are reopened in our loves. So as you prepare to receive Christ in this unique way, the very first point is to recognize that God has already been preparing you. He's already been working in you. And that your Advent preparation, immediate, that's starting this Advent, is actually only part of the whole scene of God's working in your soul.

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You can think of the sorrows that have happened this year, you can think of the losses, the struggles., you can think of the financial difficulties you've gone through, the social difficulties – and all of that suffering and hardship as being part of God's preparation. Almost like He led Israel through the desert in order to prepare them for Canaan, so also He leads us through deserts. Mary was in the great desert of the expectation of The Messiah, waiting and longing for His coming. We know this because Mary's Immaculate Conception would have made her soul the most ardent of the followers of the daughters of Israel. And as an ardent daughter of Israel, she would have been expecting The Messiah to come. And so here, we find ourselves situated with her in dryness.

It's in the sixth month of a miracle that God had worked in the womb of Elizabeth, her kinswoman, and Elizabeth had had to wait for whole existence as a married woman for this one intervention of God. God prepares us by waiting. He prepares us by the dryness of not having what we think we need to have. Think about where in your life God is asking you to wait, and instead of seeing there a type of coldness or aloofness from our Heavenly Father, who is never cold and never aloof, we need to instead see there His preparation. He's asking us to thirst. The greater our desire, the more apt we are to open ourselves to receive the intensity of His gift.

And so Mary's Advent begins with a sign of waiting in the sixth month of the one who had been called sterile. The virgin receives the angel. ***The angel went to her and said "Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words, and wondered what kind of greeting might this be.*** I love that when we think about this for our Advent, do we expect God to upset the apple cart of our life? Or have we grown routine? I think that Mary is prepared for the coming of The Messiah by a greeting here that completely stuns her. It puts her into a state of questioning. What kind of greeting could this mean? It's so funny to see how God doesn't hesitate to trouble the Virgin Mary. He doesn't hesitate. By the great plans that He has for her, Mary had to align her perspective of the trajectory of her life with the trajectory that God wanted to give it. And when God comes into our life, it's never to diminish us, or to make us less intense, less driven, less in our expectation. God always comes into our life to expand what we thought was possible, to take us to the next level, to open us to a depth that we didn't even think possible. He comes to disturb an otherwise human peace.

And so Mary here is troubled. She's greatly troubled, wondering what this greeting could mean. We now know what it means. It means that she should hang on, because God's about to do something great with her. I want to challenge you this Advent. Are you ready for the coming of The Messiah? Are you ready for the coming of your Messiah? Are you ready for God to challenge you and to take you deeper? This Advent, prepare yourself by thirst and by expectation. Whatever

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God wants, how He wants it, as long as He wants it, that's the heart of Mary. If we could have that heart inside of us, we wouldn't put limitations on God anymore.

I wonder secretly if this isn't one of the reasons why God wants devotion to Mary to be established. When Our Lady appeared in Fatima, she was very clear. She said "God wants devotion to the Immaculate Heart to be established in the world. Why would God want devotion in the Immaculate Heart to be established in the world? Why would we "need" Mary? What's the big deal about the Catholics and Mary? Why do we insist so much on the Virgin Mary? I want to tell you why. It's because the greatness of the plan of God cannot be fulfilled in our souls outside of the greatness of Mary's "Yes" to Him. By opening ourselves to her yes, and the way that she said yes, and with the faith that she said yes, we let the Holy Spirit come into our souls and bring us to an entirely new level.

And God wants us to be at that level. He wants men and women who will dare great things for Him. Not just limit themselves to little things, like "Okay God, I want You to fit into my life, into my plans. And so I've got this and this and this ready for You. So just please obey me Jesus, and then everything will go well." We're so natural, right. That's what we do. But wouldn't it be awesome instead if we reverse that prayer, and we said "God, I want You to take me into Your plans for my life. What is it that You made me for? What do You intend to have me do with the gifts that You gave me?" Let God disturb your peace. Let Him trouble you, like He did to Mary. Because the future of His plan is realized in the "Yes" and the surrender of our present.

Mary was greatly troubled at his greetings, and wondered what kind of greeting this might be, but the angel said to her "Do not be afraid Mary. You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great, and He will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will have no end." God prepares Mary for the birth of Christ by opening her to an expectant thirst. Now, as we look at our own family situations, our own cultural situation, as our lives are situated with respect to our friends, our culture, our political realities, are we with Mary in having an expectant thirst? Do we let our hearts open to hope like Mary did?

Mary could have looked around her and said "Oh my goodness, you know, look at all of the problems in my day. The Romans have occupied our land, we're not able to have the sacrifices that we want, we're not able to speak the language, we're heavily taxed." I mean you can go through a whole list and a litany of the troubles in Mary's day. "Our people have forgotten religion. No one is pious the way they should be. The temple is filled with people selling things in it." Right. And then you could think about "Gosh, that sounds so familiar to us." We look around and we see so many reasons for distress, so many reasons to give up. And so what we

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end up doing is start to say “Oh, well, I guess our religion is really not about victory anyway. I guess that in my life I shouldn’t expect God to do something.” I look at my own talents, and when I was 25 I thought I could take on the world, and now I’m 65 and I say “There’s no sense in even trying anymore.” We get discouraged. We let the power of hope diminish. God prepares us for Advent, this Advent, by rekindling in us His commandment to hope, and the power of that fire of hope.

Let yourself dare once more to count on what God wants to happen. Open your heart to His Plan, to His way of doing things. If we did that, we would allow the Holy Spirit to work in us beyond what we could ever dream. There’s a line in St. Paul that I love very much. He says ***Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, with which you have been sealed against the day redemption.*** Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Grieving the Holy Spirit, I think, it comes when we hold back, when we limit, when we act like God isn’t God, when we don’t hope. We have to remember His commandment to hope, and this is the commandment He puts in front of Mary. “Your son will be great, He will be the Son of the Most High, He will reign over the house of Jacob, and His kingdom will have no end. Do you believe this Mary? I’ve been preparing you like I’ve been preparing Israel. I’ve been crushing you by all of these reasons for thirst, by this long expectation. I’ve been allowing you to see the suffering of my people, like I allowed Moses for 40 years and for 80 years to suffer under the hand of Pharaoh. Now, I’m asking you. Will you still hope in My word?” Mary says “Let me it be done onto me according to Thy word.” She walks across the threshold of hope into that amazing reality that God promises, and our world has never been the same. He’s doing the same for you. God prepares you for Christmas by asking you to dare to hope. Open your heart to expectant thirst. Open your heart to what He wants to do. God has great things in store. God bless you.