

Come down, O Love divine; seek thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardor, glowing. Amen.

If you could be an integral part of God's plan to restore the world,
all of creation, to love and harmony – would you say yes?
Because God always gives us a choice. Mary had a choice –
I think she could have said "No, thank you..." and God would have found
another way. Maybe she wasn't his first ask?
Joseph had a choice. But they have come down in history as ones who said "Yes."
And it wasn't an easy road for them from Nazareth to Bethlehem,
for Joseph from carpenter to step-parent, from Average Joe to Saint Joseph.

But he allowed himself to be used –
it was his strength that held Mary during the birth pangs;
his hands that pulled the Savior into this world;
his resourcefulness that wrapped that babe in cloths and laid him in a
feed trough, the only warm place he could find to put him.
Joseph was present to all the messiness and muck – and so became the first witness
to that most holy moment of our history: the birth of Emmanuel, God with us.

It is remarkable that these birth stories have come down to us in the Gospels.
Mark and John don't mention Jesus' birth or infancy at all.
But these bizarre narratives did swirl around during the Church's early decades,
and the fact that Matthew and Luke include them bears witness
to their power for the early communities of Christians.

But many people find it hard to swallow – so much, that some doubt the whole
Christian claim that Jesus was God's Son born in human flesh.
That's almost as hard to swallow as the claim that this "Son of God"
died a criminal's death on a cross.
Almost as hard to swallow as the claim that this man died on that cross,
and then rose from the dead.
As we can see, even the characters in the story had some trouble swallowing it!
It took not one but two angels to keep the humans in the story on track
so it could unfold according to God's plan.

But it also took two unusually receptive humans,
both of whom said “yes” to nearly impossible requests –
not to do anything, but to allow God to work through them.
And this is where the story probably has the most power for us today.

Because, whether this is historical, “stranger than fiction” truth,
or whether it is legend that has been passed along to us to remind us
that God is above the creation God made, with its natural laws;
that God can circumvent those laws to demonstrate God’s power;
that God’s love is the most powerful force in the universe....
However we choose to interpret this story, we have a lot to learn from it with
its plot twists and choices stranger than a novelist would dare to dream up.
We have a lot to learn from Mary and Joseph.

They show us that God’s plan of salvation unfolded
through ordinary people doing extraordinary things.
God didn’t air-drop Jesus onto the field – he conceived him through the willing,
though questioning, participation of a young Galilean woman.
And he provided a companion and protector for her and the child
through a righteous, decent, ordinary carpenter named Joseph.

And God used Joseph to show that family isn’t about biology. It’s about love.
In a day and age when families come in more and more varied forms – single-
parented, gay-parented, grand-parented, adoptive, foster, multiply-blended;
Joseph reminds us that Jesus himself had an adoptive father.
Joseph reminds us that love makes a family, not DNA – his status as Mary’s husband
ensure Jesus’ lineage from David, not his biological contribution or lack thereof.

Joseph allowed God in. He allowed God to turn his life upside down.
And friends, when we allow God to come into our lives more fully –
God often rearranges the furniture in our living rooms!
Are you ever surprised at how much time you now spend at church,
or doing ministry? Have your financial priorities changed?
Are you more patient with people who annoy you,
and more impatient at the injustices of the world?

If I said, “Make more room for God in your life,” where would you find it?

What is your most cluttered room in your house? Your heart?

What is the most cluttered day in your week? What needs to get cleared?

That’s an Advent task – clearing space for more of God.

And God taking up more room in our lives invites new responses, a deep breath,
and the knowledge that God is on the move, has a purpose, and will use us.
Not to do anything on our own, but to allow God to work through us.

The heart of our sacred story is that God became human to set us free:

Emmanu-el – God with us. God with flesh on. A scandal. An impossibility.

And yet, that is what that angel told both of Jesus’ earthly parents.

This child will be called the Son of the Most High. This child will save all people.

As Mary is recorded in her song of universal equality, this child, this God-with-us,

God-with-flesh-on, would usher in the restoration of all things to
relationship with God – the new age in which the hungry have enough,
the rich share their resources, racism and oppression are undone,
justice is equally available to all, and everyone lives in security and harmony.

A mighty vision, God’s dream, yet already begun and completed in Christ,
and even now becoming visible through us.

God used Mary to bring flesh to the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus.

God used Joseph to give Jesus a fleshly father, a model to teach him,
human arms to hold him, a human voice to speak love to him.

God uses us to bring flesh to his promises in the same way,
to embody hope that defies despair, light that overcomes darkness,
love that is stronger than death, strength to pull new life into this world.

God is still putting flesh on His promises, and inviting us to let Him use
our humanity, our lives, our gifts, our weaknesses, our loves.

God is still in the business of using human beings to bring to a close

His work of redemption, and until Jesus comes again in glory,
we’re the flesh on God’s plan, the body of Christ in the world.

What part of God’s plan are you being invited to put flesh on?

If you could be a part, an integral part of God’s plan to restore the world,
all of creation, to love and harmony – would you say yes?

Amen.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 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 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 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 never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.