

“Now heaven and earth wait.”

Were you paying attention to today’s gospel reading? Did it seem strange that the crowning moment of God’s plan of salvation depended upon a young woman — a teenager, really — who came from an obscure village in a remote province of Palestine. And what’s more, this plan required her to be willing to trust a vision, a *vision*, of an angel who tells her that God wants her to conceive and bear His child? Now think about it: Does that seem like a good idea? Does it make you wonder: “How well-thought-out *is* this plan?” And the young girl’s response is odder still: She simply says, “How can this be?”

If I may be honest, this story strikes me as one that lacks credibility, for at least two reasons. First, I have two teenaged daughters; their mother and I have a hard time getting them to clean up their bedrooms. Enough said. And the second reason I think this story lacks credibility is because, well, it’s not the way I would have done it.

For example, why Nazareth? I would have chosen Jerusalem to be the place where the son of God should be born. And, why use some unknown, unmarried teenaged girl? Wouldn’t a woman from a prominent, wealthy family have done an even better job of rearing the son of God? And, finally, why send an angel to deliver such an important message? Shouldn’t such things be handled in person?

But if history has shown us anything, it’s that God does some of his best work in ordinary places, and through perfectly ordinary people. Even through people like you and me, and even in places like this. And maybe that’s the point.

Martin was born in Hungary, in the year AD 330. Although he would later become the Bishop of Tours, he spent his youth in the Roman army. While he was studying to be baptized, he was approached by a poor beggar, who asked for assistance in the name of Christ. In response, Martin drew his military sword, cut off the lower portion of his cloak, and gave it to the beggar. That evening — perhaps it was a dream, or perhaps a vision — Jesus appeared to Martin, wrapped in the lower part of a cloak, and said to him: “Martin, today you covered me with this garment.”

I’ll admit it’s a fairly dramatic story, and it seems pretty far removed from us. Nevertheless, I’m convinced that Jesus comes to us in such guises: like the people for whom we provide breakfast at St. Paul’s on the fourth Sunday of each month; or the people we adopt through our Agape Outreach. So, maybe it’s *not* so farfetched that God should come to us through an unknown teenager from Nazareth.

But, of course, this grand plan of God’s will only work if she’s willing to be used by God in this way. And so much hangs in the balance. Because Mary must have enough faith to go through

with the plan, and God must have enough faith in Mary; no easy task, because people have disappointed God so many times before. So God sends the archangel, Gabriel, to Mary. And when she hears what God wants of her, Mary is clearly troubled. Now heaven and earth wait.

There's an old folk tale that describes how, after the angel gave Mary the announcement, but before her response, there ensued a long silence. And in that silence, all the suns and planets and stars ceased their movement. But when Mary agreed, the universe once again resumed its motion.

I wonder, how many times do we need to hear today's Gospel story, before we finally see the kernel of truth contained in it? How many of us have been waiting for so long for God to present himself to us in some tangible form? How many of us have recited so many prayers, and sung so many hymns, hoping for God to appear to us? Or speak to us?

But God has already appeared to us, and spoken to us. If he can be conveyed through an unwed teenager from Nazareth, can't he also appear to us through an unwed teenager from Shawnee? If God appeared to Martin in the guise of a poor beggar, can't he do the same for us today? Absolutely! And, what is more, as the parable in Matthew 25 tells us, God appears to us through the sick, through those in prison, through those who are hungry, and through those who are homeless. We simply need the eyes of faith to see him.

Through the archangel Gabriel, God says to Mary, "Will you help me?" And through so many other equally unlikely people, God says to us, "Will you help me?" And, like Mary, we are troubled. Perhaps we don't really understand what's going on. And just as all heaven and earth awaited Mary's response, God awaits a response from each of us.

And so, for the rest of this week, as we go about our workdays, taking care of Christmas plans and errands, as we go about our daily responsibilities, let us keep this Gospel story in our minds and hearts. Remember Gabriel's greeting announcement of God's plan for hope and salvation. God is waiting for the Holy Child of Bethlehem to be born in us, and he cannot be born in us unless, like Mary, we are prepared to offer ourselves – our souls and bodies – to him. The Holy Child cannot be born in us unless we, like Mary, find faith and courage. And in the meantime, the heavens and the earth wait.