

The Fourth Station of Advent: An Encounter with Grace **by Tom Redmond, SM**

Introduction: One of the things I appreciate this Advent is its length; with Christmas on Sunday we have a full four weeks of this holy season of waiting and preparing, of anticipation and expectation. Because of its length this year it seems appropriate to have these four Stations of Advent to help us pause, to get our bearings, and to refocus our attention and attitudes.

Our previous Stations have invited us to an attentive awareness, a more intense presence with the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist, and a keener attentiveness to annunciations. Now at this fourth and last Station of Advent I offer three specific points for us to consider, each from Sunday's liturgy: the first reading, the Gospel, and the Collect—all leading us to an encounter with grace.

King David and Mary: The experience of having our plans change is all too common. Sometimes this change comes in the middle of an endeavor, and we realize that we have to change our focus, our attitude, or our approach.

The first reading (2 Samuel 7) describes the plan of King David to build a house for God, the Temple. Through the wisdom of the prophet's dream, David lets go of his plan and listens to God's plan. It is not King David who will build God a dwelling place, but God, in God's time, will fashion a dwelling through faithful hearts and lives.

Our Gospel reading for Sunday is the account of the Annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26 +). We know the story well: the angel's appearance and message to Mary, Mary's question, the angel's reply, and then Mary's fiat—her yes—"Let it be done to me according to your will." The piece I'd like to focus on is Mary's question, "How can this be?" It is a natural human response. How many times have we said this or something similar, such as: "I don't understand, how can this possibly work out?" or "Why is this happening to me?" or "What is God or life asking of me through this?" It's a basic human experience that happens in life. We have our plan, our idea of how something or someone should be. But things change; like Mary, we have our questions, "How?" "Why?" The answer lies in the angel's words to Mary, "Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Holy Spirit will come upon you." It is grace, God's holy and loving presence that supports Mary's yes and makes it all possible.

A similar thing happened to Joseph. After he learned that Mary was pregnant "he had made up his mind to divorce her quietly when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream (Joseph's own annunciation). Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." The Gospel records no words spoken by Joseph, only his response, "when Joseph awoke he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do." (Mt 1:18+) It is grace, God's holy and loving presence, that supports Joseph's openness and responsiveness.

Much has been said and written about grace; a professor of mine on the first day of a theology class spoke the line I like the best. She said, "We will be reading, writing, and discussing a lot about grace in this class. Some have described grace as 'that which raises us to a new level of being, a higher level of awareness'". I think this simple-yet-profound line says it all, grace—God's loving presence—moves us, changes us, helps us to see things from a different perspective.

The Collect: The last piece to this Station of Advent comes from the Collect (the opening prayer) of Sunday's Mass, "pour your grace into our hearts." In that same graduate level course in theology a classmate of mine shared that "grace makes us vulnerable." If we take our relationship with God seriously our prayer has meaning for both God and for us; as we open ourselves to the action of God in our lives, things will change, we will change!

At this Fourth Station of Advent, with the models of King David and Mary before us, we ask God to pour holy and loving presence into our hearts, into our hearts as individuals and into our hearts as a Church community. Awareness (from our first Station of Advent) is again asked of us in this fourth week of Advent!

Grace and the Liturgy: During the years of praying the Mass I've come to deeply appreciate the readings and prayers in our liturgy. We have a rich variety of selections from the Bible through the three-year cycle of Sunday readings. I saw a spiritual depth in many of the Alternate Opening Prayers and several of the Preface Prayers in the former Sacramentary. When I discovered that the third edition of the Roman Missal contained none of these prayers, but a more literal translation of the prayers from the Latin, I felt I had lost something significant. I am beginning to realize that the inviting grace that led me to see and savor the richness of the prayers in the Sacramentary is still with me as we now pray with the Roman Missal.

The Collect at Sunday's Mass reads:

Pour forth, we beseech you O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.

I believe what we are asking on this fourth Sunday of Advent is that God's grace be with us, leading us through the Paschal Mystery into the wonder and joy of the Resurrection. What a wonderful request to make in Advent, that may we see and live the wholeness and fullness of the life of Jesus, our Lord.

One Last Piece: This year of 2011 we Marianists have been celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade in 1761. As Founder of The Society of Mary and cofounder of the Marianist Family with Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, Blessed Chaminade saw in Mary the model for our response in faith. The Annunciation, the wedding feast at Cana, and the Calvary scene all hold rich examples of Mary's openness, attentiveness, and presence to God's Word and to the human condition.

There is a line in the prayer written for this Chaminade Year that holds a key insight. We pray:

May the Spirit who came upon Mary and who inspired you
(Blessed Chaminade) lead us to that faith of the heart which
will enable us in all our different works to "Do whatever he tells us."

The Spirit upon Mary was an encounter that changed human history. The Spirit upon Blessed Chaminade at Saragossa inspired him to see with new eyes, to work in a communal effort, and to love with a persevering heart. In this prayer we ask that the same Holy Spirit that blessed Mary and Chaminade bless us that we may be attentive and responsive to what we hear. Pour your grace into our hearts O Lord, that we may be open and responsive to all that You hold before us. Amen.

Some Focus Questions:

1. From my lived experience I would describe grace as . . .
2. There are times in life when our plans change, when God's inviting grace calls us to see and do things differently.
 - a) One of these times was . . .
 - b) When and where did it happen?
 - c) What feelings did I have about this then?
 - d) What feelings do I have about this now?
 - e) What is happening in my life now because of all this?
 - f) What is it that I want to say to God about this?
3. What stirs in the deepest recesses of my heart as I hear and listen to Mary's words, "Do whatever he tells you"?