

## CHRISTMAS APPROACHES! AH! CHRISTMAS!

I love words. I enjoy them. I like playing with them, tweaking them, exaggerating them, understating them, using them to paint a verbal picture. Words are amazing to me. Their power—for good or ill—cannot be overstated. Our words root us in the present moment and enable us to convey meaning and receive messages in return. Today I want to focus on a particular kind of word. Namely: A Promise. To promise something to someone. A promise is a word I speak that binds me to another and to an action in the future that I guarantee I will do for someone. In this time of year before Christmas children are especially attuned to promises. They want to bind their parents to make sure that certain presents will be there on Christmas morning. “Promise?” they ask. “Promise?” They seek assurances for the hope that is in their hearts.

We get this. Promises exist in the world of adults too. I made some promises when I was ordained. My oath of celibacy and my promise of obedience and respect to my bishop and his successors. Many of you made significant promises at the time of your marriage. “I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I promise to love you and honor you all the days of my life.” I will do it. I will be there. You can count on me. You can trust my word. We cannot live in this world without such promises so significant are they to the ordinary commerce of our living.

What we rarely reflect upon though is that we make promises and we give our word because we are made in the image and likeness of a God who makes promises and gives his Word. The Gospel we just heard is filled with promises both human and divine. And some of these promises sound implausible or even impossible to the one hearing them. In this case a young Jewish maiden named Mary from a little backwater town in northern Galilee in the first century.

Listen again to what she hears the messenger say to her:

You are full of grace and you have found favor with God. (These words set up the promises). I who speak God’s word to you promise on behalf of God:

- 1) You will conceive a son in your womb;
- 2) You will name him Jesus
- 3) The Holy Spirit will come upon you
- 4) The Most High God will overshadow you;
- 5) The child will be called holy, the Son of God.

Five promises. Five amazing promises. All made one right after the other. Overwhelming. Impossible sounding. Mary is surprised. She is in a quandary, not able to grasp or fully understand (who possibly could?) With her own questions about what and how. Give birth to a king, to the Son of God. Me? A teenager from Nazareth? She is humbled. You can almost sense her lowering her head in submission. This is all a little too much. But then raising it

again to pronounce her answer to the Archangel's implicit but unspoken question. Will you Mary put your faith in these promises which seem impossible to you?

All the world awaits her answer. And it does not have to wait long at all. "Yes! Of course! I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say, as the Lord has promised." There is an urgency to her response. Time's a wasting. The People of Israel have been waiting for this day for centuries. Yes. Of course, yes! All the world has been waiting for this day to come. But this one to be born, while being of the house and lineage of David will not be a king like David. Not an earthly king. But he will be a king and he has a kingdom. His love will be on display, on that cross, for all the world to see. Terribly wounded. Truly vulnerable. Everyone staring. Some mocking. Others pointing. Over his head will be a sign. Jesus. King. Yes. His kingdom breaks into our world right there. His reign begins, in the hearts of those who love him and believe in him—right there.

And about those five promises. How many of them has God kept? Why, all five. Because that's who God is. He is the One who promises and keeps his promises. We are the ones who believe. And say "yes" like Mary. When? Why, right now!

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.