

Did you hear about the woman a couple of years ago –true story—who forgot to do her Christmas cards until the last minute and rushed out to buy three boxes of cards and brought them home and filled them all out and addressed them and sent them off? When she got home, she was exhausted so she relaxed in her chair with a glass of wine and listened to Christmas CD, and she picked up one of her cards and said, “That’s nice. I’ll actually get a chance to read what I sent to people,” so she picked up the one of the cards and it said: “Just a little card to say...a special gift is on its way.”

Sometimes I think that the prayer we need to pray this time of your is not “forgive us our debtors as we forgive our debtors,” but instead needs to be “forgive us the stress we bring upon ourselves as we forgive those people and things that stress us out.”

Christmas is two days away. Are you ready? And more importantly, for what are you ready? Are you ready for the real importance of Christmas?

Sometimes a little child will lead us to “know” the important parts of the season. There is a story of the parents who were in a big rush to get Christmas all done up, and they told the kids that under no uncertain terms were they to get out of bed until daybreak on Christmas morning. Then they snuck around and placed baseball gloves, and bicycles, etc. under the tree, and went to bed. About four in the morning their little seven year-old rushed into their room saying, “Mommy, I saw it. Quick, come quick.” The parents grumbled, got up, and immediately decided since that the surprise was ruined, they might as well get all of the kids up so that the rest could see their toys since one had already done so. So they hustled all the others up and brought them down stairs. But the little boy ran right pass the tree and went over to a window and said, “See, see, there it is in the east. It’s the star. I saw it.”

I appreciate the wisdom of having this passage as the lectionary passage for the fourth Sunday of Advent, because the story teaches us not to rush past what God has done in Jesus and through Mary and Elizabeth. The story teaches us not to rush past what Jesus came for and the impact that has on our lives and our world.

Let’s look at today’s text. Mary has just been told by an angel that she will give birth to the Son of God. Upon hearing the news, she doesn’t just sit there and do nothing. It is funny how often we overlook the fact that Mary is a woman on the move. Traveling alone, like many a prophet before her, she sets out on her first journey of what will be many more journeys. This first journey is to her cousin, Elizabeth’s house. The intimate conversation between the two of them that is captured in today’s text is quite telling. It tells us what we know, because we’ve read ahead in the gospels – that is, that Jesus is more important than John. It also tells us two things that we know, but that are hard for us to remember. The first is this: that even before it is visible to most people, God is at work to overturn the world’s structures and expectations – something that was true back then and is still true today. And second, God consistently chooses the lowly and shamed ones to transform the world.

I am always amazed that Mary understood and hopped on to God's program for her and for the world from the very beginning. Would you have been so bold and brave? Both women see beyond the shameful that society would label Mary's pregnancy with to the reality of God's love at work even among and in those whom society rejects and excludes. Before Jesus is born and grows up to teach in the temple and among the disciples, God is using him through Mary to teach us some important, life-defining lessons.

There's a lesson about God – When it comes to God's purposes concerning the transformation of the world, God isn't limited by human definitions of wealth, power, goodness, honor and shame. God isn't impressed by riches and status. God isn't even limited by age, skill, location, and time. God chose Mary – a young woman who turns out to be rather well spoken, wise and perhaps even gritty – after all, there is nothing meek and mild about the song of praise that she sings at the end of the conversation with Elizabeth. Indeed, the ways that God chooses to act in the world may confound and astound us. It begs the question: how willing are we to watch and wait for the unexpected ways of God or do we prefer to domesticate God and expect God to do our bidding only. And if and when God doesn't do our bidding, do we lose faith and move on? Could we ever reimagine God as someone more breathtaking and wild that we dare to imagine? It seems to me that wild and breathtaking God is exactly the God that Mary knew, loved and was faithful to.

We also can't overlook God's intentions for the world. God is concerned about the lowly and powerless, and God intends for them to be uplifted and to be empowered too. God is concerned about the hungry and disadvantaged and God intends for them to have what they need for wellbeing too. God is concerned about the people stuck in structures that peddle gate and violence and intends for them to have the freedom they need.

And God intends for us, who seek to be faithful to God, just as Mary did, to be ones, like Mary, through whom God works for the transformation of the world. God intends for us to be those through whom he can work to lift up lowly, feed the hungry, and take down the haves so that the have-nots can have too.

Sometimes that easy and convenient to do – deliver soup to someone who has just come home from the hospital, or raise some money for a good cause? Other times it is hard, hard work and not convenient. Sometimes the work means that we see pieces of the shadow side of life that we don't want to see ... like the evil of violence, especially domestic violence, the grip of addiction, and pain and chains of poverty and racism that often oppress not just generations of families but whole communities. Sometimes it means we have to stop taking for granted what we do have and do enjoy.

As you know, I've been reading Father Gregory Boyle's book, Barking to the Choir. For close to 30 years, he has been doing some of the most difficult work in ministry in a community in Los Angeles riddled with gangs and violence. One person at a time, he seeks to transform the lives of these gang members, not just with unconditional love and kindness, but with concrete help such as life-skill development, employment, faith development, and more. It is hard work, not always successful. Often there are many, many do-overs before the transformation happens and sticks. In the book he tells the story of Lencho. Now I quote: "Lencho, his lady, and their two kids are finally able to have a

place of their own. It's not much, but it's theirs. They no longer have to sleep in some in-law's living room or battle for the bathroom. "My life has become so repetitious," he told me once, heavy with sadness. Prison, rehab, addiction, repeat: Lencho had grown weary of it all. He asked me to swing by one day and bless his new home. When I do, I see that the place is sparse, and what they do have has been cobbled together from the furniture donations that find their way to Homeboy. We do the blessing, the two little ones gingerly holding the plastic salad bowl with the holy water as we walk from room to room, spritzing each one. We bless the bathroom: "*para que todo salga bien. So that everything comes out okay.*" The kids giggle. Afterward, Lencho walks me to my car. "Imagine, G. Our own place. I mean, we can walk around naked, if we want to!" (pp. 42-43, Barking to the Choir by Gregory Boyle. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017) Do you take having a place of your own for granted? It's one of the reasons our work for Habitat for Humanity is so vital.

Two days before Christmas would we ever stop and ask: what really is occupying most of our heads and heart space? Where is God at work with and through people that are often excluded or treated as shameful and therefore are often shunned?

Throughout Advent, we are reminded over and over again to "Stay awake" This not a warning that something bad is about to happen, as if we need to be on high alert all the time. It is a reminder that life is happening now. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day that God is at work in the world, transforming the world. Today is the day that God calls us to get in the middle of what God is already doing whether that is convenient or not. Indeed, Mary signed on to God's program for her and for the world immediately – in the present moment. The only moment that any of us have to participate with God in God's wide mercy and amazing power to transform the world is now – this moment. Indeed, the birth of Jesus should define the direction and purpose of our lives not just around Christmas, but every day.

I said at the beginning that Mary's journey to see Elizabeth was the first of several journeys that she would take in her life. Who knew that being faithful to God and being the mother of Jesus would take her so many places. After this journey, there's the journey to Bethlehem where Jesus is born. Then there's the journey to Egypt, in order to flee the tyrant Herod. Then there's the journey back from Egypt. There's the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve and the journey to Jerusalem again when Jesus is crucified. We have no hints that Mary resisted any of these journeys. She was a woman of faith, who trusted God. Therefore, she was a woman on the go. My guess is that, rather than the meek and mild image that many carry of Mary at Christmas, she was in fact strong and rather adventuresome, highly trusting of God, and rather spunky to trust God and have a baby in the middle of a society that would want to shame and exclude her and her baby.

Meister Eckart, the German mystic of the 13th century said, "We are all called be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born." Maybe rather than being ready for Christmas, it is more important to be ready to for the year-round work of Christmas. Imagine the adventure. Imagine where that just might take us.