

Back in January of 2002, a London hospital had to notify about 30 of their patients that their scheduled procedures had to be re-scheduled for another time. [You may remember seeing this in the news.] Due to a clerical error, however, the computer-generated form letter that was sent out said to the patients: “Your doctor is pleased to inform you that you are expecting a baby!” You can imagine the surprise felt by at least some of the women who received the letter, and the high anxiety the letter certainly caused in some of the homes of the people who received it. Also among the recipients of the letter were six elderly gentlemen. Imagine *their* surprise!

I can imagine that Mary must have felt somewhat the same disbelief, as Gabriel delivered his message. Here she was, a young woman, betrothed but not married, still a virgin. How could she be with child? Gabriel’s message was not an easy one to take in – made even more difficult by the setting of her tiny village: everyone knew everyone else, and many people were related to each another; everyone knew that she and Joseph had not yet begun to live together. And they could all count to nine. What would they say about her, what kinds of nasty looks would they cast her way, as the child grew within her?

Mary questions how this can be; and Gabriel assures her that in the midst of this difficult situation, God will bring forth blessing, holiness, and salvation for all. Twice Gabriel assures her that she is grace-filled and is favored in God’s sight, even if others will question it, and look askance at her. . . . Mary accepts her unique role, and makes a physical home for the Holy One in her womb.

Mary's discipleship continues to teach us how to make room for God in our lives. And this is our Advent task for this final week: we are to make a dwelling place within ourselves and within our world for the Christ.

Like in Mary's time, the circumstances are not easy; there are so many factors in the world and in our lives which make it difficult to prepare a place for our God to come. But, we need to remind ourselves that it is not in glorious buildings beautifully adorned where God takes up residence, but in the humblest of persons, in the most difficult of circumstances. It's ironic that in difficult times – times when we may feel abandoned by God, or times when we may question why God is punishing us, or why we have lost God's favor: it is precisely in these times that God dwells most intimately with us, assuring us that we are full of grace and favor, asking us to trust that He can and will bring forth blessing, even if we cannot imagine how.

We need to take care that we are not like the inn of the old tradition where there is no room, and from which Mary and Joseph were turned away. Too many worries, too many projects, too many parties, too much shopping, too many gifts, too many bills – all these can crowd their way into the empty place where God wishes to enter and dwell in divine fullness.

We often prepare symbols of welcome: the manger and the crèche, the wreaths and the trees, the gifts, and offerings of all kinds. But in truth, all these are symbols of the preparation that should be going on in each of our hearts. **WE** are the empty crèche awaiting the presence of God. Advent reminds us – in the midst of the messiness and

difficulties of our lives – to clear a space, to empty the clutter that crowds our lives, and to create a place of welcome for our God. Through our praying, through our reflecting, through our hoping, and through our yearning for the Holy One, we create the open space and the loving welcome which God will fill.

And when we welcome the divine presence, we become holy people, and holy places of encounter with God. Then, through our eyes, God sees; and through our ears, God hears; and through our feet, the good news of God's abiding presence is carried to all the dark and lonely places that otherwise may never see the Light of the World. Unbelievable? YES! Definitely! But as the angel Gabriel said to Mary: "nothing will be impossible for God."