



December 23rd Reflection No. 250

In today's Gospel we read the wonderful story of John's birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah. It reminds us how God was with them and those around them as witnesses of something special. Special because God blessed them with a son in the latter years of their life and to a women who was thought not to be able to have children.

Reading back a few paragraphs in Luke, however, we learn about the story of Zechariah, a good and righteous priest. The Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while in the temple and shared with him the good news that he and Elizabeth would become pregnant with a baby boy. The story tells of Zechariah's fear of Gabriel and quite naturally questions Gabriel about the news. It would seem quite a natural reaction given the biological nature of the situation and the fact that Gabriel was in a position of authority in the community, which generally comes with the privilege of questioning others. Because of Zechariah's response to Gabriel and his apparent lack of trust in the good news, he was left with the inability to speak until the birth of his son.

Interestingly, instead of going straight to John's birth, Luke's Gospel goes on to tell the story about how Mary was approached by Gabriel with a similar message. Although initially frightened, her reaction was quite different from that of Zechariah. She did not question the message or the messenger (she really just wanted to know "how" it was going to

happen since she wasn't "with" a man). She accepted the news with, "let it be." What a demonstration of faith, courage, and trust. Mary was an unwed teenager who would seem to have every natural tendency to resist and respond with every action imaginable to not accept the news. But, she didn't. Luke's Gospel story does not say that Mary was worthy, smart, comes from a good family, or has great potential to be a wonderful mother. It doesn't qualify her to be the mother of Jesus in any way. So why was she chosen? Perhaps it is because she was humble, modest, simple, and lived a kind of "nothingness" type of life (according to cultural standards) without status in the community? Is this what the "Virgin" Mary means? Not looking at virginity only from a biological viewpoint, but rather also from an inner-most person perspective. And, if this is what virginity can mean, are these the qualities that we need in order to truly receive Christ? Is this the posture we need both inside and out in order to be ready to receive Christ on Christmas morning? Perhaps the Virgin Mary was chosen because she was ready to receive – and ready to receive in an opposite way compared to what we are used to in our culture. It seems that her apparent "nothingness" (her virginity) is paradoxically what put her in an ideal position to receive.

Zechariah was clearly a good man, but the contrast between Mary and him is what caught my attention in this story. Mary represents humility, simplicity, and a way of life that doesn't match the cultural expectations of power, money, attachment, or achievement. Zechariah, on the other hand, was in a position to question rather than trust. He was not yet ready to receive. Perhaps this was the purpose of the gift of silence he received from Gabriel. He needed more time in silence and stillness. This stillness that he experienced in the nine months leading up to the birth of John allowed him to truly see and rejoice at the gift – it put him in a position to receive. The contrasts between Mary and Zechariah is yet another example in the Gospel stories that show us that nothingness, a certain type of virginity, puts us in a position to receive. We can hear God best when we are still, and without feeling the need for status, power, money, influence, and achievement. It seems that the Gospel stories continue to tell us to let go of these things and return to our

virgin-like state – like Mary. If we do, we can then be ready for the coming of the Christ Jesus.

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