

Holy Mary, the Mother of God

New Year's Eve is probably the least favorite from all the Holydays. While the rest of the world is preparing for a party or relaxing in front of TV, here we are in church. What could the church possibly have in mind, to call this assembly on that particular day, dedicated to the Mother of God?

The gospel today gives us one answer when it highlights Mary as the woman who treasures the good news of Christmas and ponders it in her heart. Maybe, with all the holiday excitement, we missed some of the essential message of Christmas. Maybe we heard it without really believing or understanding it. Maybe we have forgotten how to hear it so that it makes a difference in our lives.

Mary teaches us how to hear and receive the word of God. We learn from her how to recognize and cherish the wonder of God with us, treasuring and pondering the great gift of God in our midst.

Saint Paul gives us another reason for this New Year's gathering when he speaks of the freedom and confidence which is our Christian legacy. Most of us tend to hang on to the past, to the security of the familiar. No matter how glad we may be to see 2018 end, when the time comes to take the step into a new year, with all its promise and uncertainty, we feel nostalgia, hesitation, maybe even sadness. If the truth be known, at some level of our mind, we are probably afraid. The dawn of the new is also the door to the unknown.

Saint Paul reminds us that, instead of facing the future in fear and trembling, like slaves of an unpredictable master, we ought to act

confidently, like the sons and daughters we are. Jesus the savior came to set us free from the fears that imprison us, the addictions and forces that shackle our bodies and spirits. The birth of this child marks the beginning of the new creation. As his brothers and sisters by adoption, we become successors of the family business, the work of re-creating the world in God's image.

Will 2019 find us rejecting that responsibility, bearing it unwillingly like slaves, or rolling up our sleeves and getting to work? As we face the challenge of the year ahead, Paul's message of encouragement is that we can always fall back on our family connections. The Spirit of God's firstborn and beloved child, Jesus, has been sent into our hearts to be always with us.

So our faith and trust are renewed as we gather today in the warm feeling of Christmas. Traveling along the road of faith, we pause at the manger to be warmed by the fire of the incredible love revealed there. We pause to see; and, like the shepherds, we come to understand what we have been told about this child. We remember a promise, and we ponder the faithfulness of our God who kept that promise in Jesus and who continues to keep it in our lives.

But the church year will not let us stay there, like plastic figures in a Nativity set, frozen in adoration. The power of Christmas radiates out from the stable in wider and wider circles, as we will hear and celebrate in the weeks to come.

The shepherds return, spreading the word with loud voices and thankful hearts, astonishing all who hear them. The child is circumcised

in obedience to the law, and his parents give him a name which means “God saves,” a name which foretells his mission of freedom to Israel. At his presentation in the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon and Anna confirm that the circle is to extend still farther, because the child is to be salvation for all nations, not only the glory of his own people but a light to enlighten the gentiles as well.

The blessing of today’s first reading echoes the blessing of the angels’ song: “Peace to those on whom God’s favor rests!” In the child of Christmas, we are truly filled with every blessing. In Jesus, the Lord’s face has shone on us; in Jesus, the goodness and kindness of God has appeared. In him we, like Mary, have found favor with God.

But this experience of salvation is for everyone, for all nations and all peoples. And that brings us back to the work of Christmas, which is now our work. How can God’s way be known upon earth, unless we live it and make it known? How can the blessing of peace be realized, unless we enlarge the circle of peace outward from our own hearts and from this community to include our neighborhood, our country, and our world – “all the ends of the earth?” If our pondering of the good news does not lead us that far, then we have stopped short of grasping the word in its fullness.

The simple scene of the mother and infant, seemingly far removed from our complex, violent world, stands as a challenge to the principalities and powers of our day. At the designated time, one woman was willing to let God’s work be done through her. Her simple “yes” changed the course of history and brought blessing and peace to

all people. At this “designated time,” God asks us to allow Jesus to be born in us, to be a source of blessing for our world, to collaborate in the work of the new creation, to be instruments of his peace.

All it takes is a simple “yes,” a “yes” like Mary’s, born out of remembering God’s promises and their fulfillment, a “yes” born out of treasuring and pondering the good news of a child whose name means salvation, a child in whom we are saved and freed and brought into the very family of God.

The Eucharist we celebrate today places us right in the midst of that event and that reality, yesterday, today and forever. **Amen.**

