

Fourth Sunday of Advent, A – December 21, 2025 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Masses – 820 words

Throughout the sacred scriptures, we see a sort of discontent expressed by various individuals and groups about God's presence in their lives. Think of the Israelites who had just escaped from slavery to Pharaoh: God had entered into their lives and literally taken the lead, guiding them out of Egypt in a miraculous way; yet soon enough they were complaining against God and Moses and yearning for the olden days of slavery.

We could name many such cases during the forty years of the Exodus, but they are not all. For example, none other than the prophet Jeremiah questioned why the wicked seemed to prosper, implying that for them things go better than for those who remain with the Lord (Jer 12). And the psalmist himself cried out famously, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps 13), in a moment of anguish tinged with melodrama.

The successor of King David in the first reading, Ahaz, responded in an insincere way to the prophet Isaiah. He was a lukewarm and unimpressive man; content to live life more or less without God, even while trying to veil that behind a veneer of false piety. Isaiah called him out squarely for it. But who could blame Ahaz, in a way? Maybe he, too, had concluded it was better to keep God at arm's length than to let him get too close.

Then we consider the gospel narratives that represent the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy to Ahaz, the fullness of God's entering into the human condition and, as it were, stirring things up. The gospels of Matthew and Luke teach us that both Mary and Joseph were of the house of David: but why were they in the small backwater town of Nazareth instead of in Jerusalem? It was because their dynasty was in political disfavor. They, with so many others of David's line, were keeping a low profile until more favorable times prevailed.

Thus the surprise that both Joseph and Mary express when the angel brought special tidings to them. Joseph was anything but lukewarm; he truly desired to please God; but we gather that he also desired to live a quiet and uneventful life. Mary was anything but lukewarm; she truly desired to please God; but we gather too that she never dreamed of what could come next. Both of them had to face the decision: let God in or not?

And unlike the cynical, the resentful, the lukewarm, and the ungrateful cases of so many that went before them – I have mentioned really only a few – and frankly, of so many who would come after them, too, they both said yes. They chose to "let God in", to take the risk of opening their lives to him and letting him take the lead. And it changed the entire course of history – and we are here today because we have let God in, too.

But have we not also been tempted to resent him, at times? Have we not on occasion grown impatient or frustrated with God? Or, for those with a more pagan past, have we not, now and then, had some nostalgia about our "salad days"? Yet even the saints have struggled: Saint Teresa of Avila once suffered a setback, and Jesus told her that this was how he treated his friends. She retorted: "No wonder you have so few!"

Did Mary, or Joseph, or Saint Teresa of Avila, or any of the other greats then retreat and leave God behind, effectively sending him to the curb and closing the door on him? No! They, like none other than Saint Paul, who suffered in incredible ways after welcoming Jesus into his life, were able to appreciate the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, [their] Lord" and to consider any other form of existence as "rubbish" (Phil 3).

Here, to conclude, we must think about another dimension of today's gospel. Jesus, the angel told Joseph, came to save us from our sins. Yes, we can look back with a certain nostalgia at sin, but we must also admit that it makes us miserable; it always disappoints; it always leaves us

empty. Christ came not merely to forgive our sins at the end to finally get us into heaven, but to help us stop sinning even while still on earth!

When we allow him in and allow him to lead, he takes us on a great adventure with many twists and turns... and yes, with many sufferings, too. He treats us as friends, no longer slaves or servants (Jn 15:15). But the peace we experience; the joy, the happiness in the “here and now” – not just at some future date – are worth it compared to the despair of remaining slaves in sin. As we approach another Christmas, we praise God that Mary, Joseph, and so many other saints “let him in” – and we ask for perseverance in doing likewise.