

Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A FIVE STAR CHRISTMAS

1. I am a fast eater in sharp contrast to my wife. She chews and savors every bite; I inhale my food like oxygen, sometimes treating a meal as if it was just a necessary part of living. I didn't like fine dining because it took too long to get the food; fast food was my gig. It didn't need to taste great; it just needed to fill that empty spot in my belly. I would pull into a drive-through the way you pull into a gas station..."fill 'er up"
Sometimes I hardly even paid attention to the menu ordering a #1 medium and just consumed whatever they threw in the bag.
2. And I used to approach church the same way I approached food; not really paying attention to what I was eating and often being in a hurry to finish and move on to other activities, like television and recreation. I think a lot of folks treat church this way; they have some spiritual hunger, and church quenches the appetite. We need to be reminded to be good to others, we need to feel forgiven, and we need to know that death is not the end of existence. We don't necessarily want to know *God*; we just need assurance that he's taking care of our needs. That's a fast-food church where we can be fed quickly, adequately, cheaply, and get on with our business.
3. So what would we do if we got more than what we ordered? What would happen if we went to McDonalds, ordered a #1 medium with a Coke and we got lobster bisque and fillet mignon and champagne to drink? Would we complain? So what happens when we come to church expecting fast food and instead we get fine dining? What happens when we get a real taste of God's true presence on a Sunday morning. The music, the sermon, the prayers may help create an environment that facilitates that experience, but all of that does not guarantee that you'll have a full encounter with God. Likewise, being away from a church, in a den of iniquity does not necessarily mean that you won't have a live-changing with God in that environment. What happens when God suddenly comes storming into your world?
4. That's what happened to this young girl named Mary in today's Gospel reading. She wasn't much different from a young teenage girl today – perhaps she was a little bit nervous about getting married (girls back then usually did get married in their early teens). She was likely more meek and modest than American girls today because back then girls were told that they were not as good as boys. But in most ways Mary was just like one of us. Mary probably went to church to get her fast food, some assurance that God would make her life better someday. She probably prayed that she would find some joy with her new husband Joseph, and she probably felt the same way many of us do when we pray; glad that she expressed her need to God, but not at all sure that he would tend to those needs. All Mary really wanted was a happy meal; instead she got a gourmet meal as God comes crashing into Mary's world in the form of an angel, Gabriel, who says to her, "The Lord is with you."
5. How many times have you heard *that* in church; "the Lord be with you"? I don't think the words register to most of us; we just offer the automatic response ("and-also-with-

you) and nothing really changes when we hear it from each other. I guess if an angel said it to us we might take it a bit more literally, but coming from one another it's just another French fry – tastes the same each time, and nothing to rave about. Perhaps we understand that to mean God's inner presence in our hearts, but when we actually hear that from an agent of the divine, do we take it to heart? Mary hears it from an angel, and suddenly she recognizes that the Lord is really with her.

6. She's also perplexed because Gabriel has just called her "favored one." Isn't that a surprise? Mary, a teenage girl, a nobody from Galilee, *favored*? That's not what her world had called her; her world had called her "chattel" or "insignificant." Haven't you felt the world calling you that from time to time? When your employer hands you a pink slip, when a loved one doesn't return your call? When you're treated like a commodity that can be bought or sold? But when we stand in the presence of the Almighty, to be told by God that we are significant, we are relevant, we are beloved. That can perplex us.
7. But then, perhaps, we may think through what's happening and ask, "What's the catch?" Okay so God is with me, and I'm favored, but favored *why*? It must be God has something he plans to do with me. This angel is a good salesman; he waits to the end of the presentation to give her the price. Mary will bear a child who will be none other than the Son of God. It sounds great, but can she believe it? And I think this gets to the reason as to why Mary has found favor with God. I don't think that Mary was any more pious than other girls her age living in Nazareth or anywhere else. I don't think she was any smarter than other girls living in Nazareth or anywhere else. I don't think that she was any more charming. I don't think she was any prettier than other girls. *The reason Mary was favored was not because of anything she was born with or anything she had done; she was favored because of what she was about to do, and that was to say "Yes" to the Lord.* And by saying "yes," Mary is expressing a faith that is unfortunately quite rare in this world. She is believing in miracles. She is believing what Gabriel tells her, that with God, "nothing will be impossible."
8. Can we let those words resonate? Say, "With God, nothing will be impossible." The insecurities you feel with your job or your marriage, the shame of some past sin that keeps nagging you, the fear and the anger that hold toward someone that you just cannot love or forgive. "With God, nothing is impossible."
9. But there's more to this message, to this meal that Luke has presented us. Mary does more than acknowledge God's amazing presence with her. She does more than believe that God is able to do the impossible. Mary also responds to her belief by becoming God's own instrument of love and grace. Mary *complies* with God's plan. Because she believes that with God nothing is impossible, she is willing to bear a child out of wedlock knowing that the by the laws of her own people she could face execution or be cast out of her own and die a beggar. She has faith that God is going to carry this child through to full term and deliver a son into this world. She has faith that she can raise and nurture this child.
10. Christmas is about something more than God's presence; it's about more than having faith in his abilities to do miracles; it's about our compliance to be involved in his plans, to be agents of his love and his forgiveness. It's about Jesus being born for us and being born in us, so that we can

be submissive to God's will, healing where healing is needed, ministering to a broken world until it is healed and Jesus reigns not only in us but in the hearts of all people. And like Mary, we have to accept the risks that faith demands. Like Mary we need to say, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be done according to thy word."