

“Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Savior.” These beautiful words taken from the prophet Isaiah serve as the entrance antiphon for today’s celebration of the 4th Sunday of Advent. They voice our heart’s cry, our cry for the Savior to come into this world, and help to draw us more deeply into the mystery of today’s liturgy.

In our first reading which is also from the prophet Isaiah we heard, “The Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign from the Lord, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky! But Ahaz answered, ‘I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!’” At first, this sounds like a very pious response by Ahaz, one which echoes the commandment in Deuteronomy to “not put the Lord your God to the test.” And yet, Isaiah’s response to Ahaz is filled with frustration. He says that since Ahaz will not ask for a sign, God Himself will give one. “The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.”

It is interesting to compare Ahaz’s response to the response given by Mary when the Angel Gabriel appeared to her. Gabriel says, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” Mary is troubled by these words and responds, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” On the surface, it seems like Mary’s response doubts God, and yet she is proclaimed blessed. How are we to understand this seeming dichotomy between Ahaz and Mary when one is seemingly condemned for not questioning God and the other is named blessed for doing so?

We can begin to answer this question by studying the context of today’s first reading. The kingdom of Judah was being attacked by other nations, and Ahaz was scared that they would be defeated. God sent the prophet Isaiah to tell Ahaz to not fear the nations allied against him. Instead, he merely needed to trust in God and

they would be protected. It was within this context that Isaiah told Ahaz to ask for a sign from God to prove that they would in fact be protected.

Instead of asking for a sign, Ahaz refused to ask anything of God. So Isaiah tells Ahaz that God Himself will give a sign that He will protect the Israelites from their enemies and bring them to freedom, saying “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” Despite this, Ahaz disregarded God’s message and turned to the Assyrians instead of God for protection. He even went so far as to abandon the worship of Yahweh for worship of the Assyrian’s gods, giving himself and the Temple of God over to idolatrous worship.

In the same way, we should also examine the context of Mary’s question as well. Mary was told that she was going to give birth to a son. At first, this doesn’t seem to be something impossible since she was already engaged to be married, and yet Mary is shocked and asks, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” Scripture scholars note that when Mary says “I have no relations with a man” the words in their original language indicated not only that she had not yet known a man, but that she would not ever intimately know a man in the future. In other words, Mary had made a vow of perpetual virginity to God. Within this context, her question makes sense, but when the Angel Gabriel explained God’s plan, she said, “May it be done to me according to your word.”

As I was reflecting on these two different stories, it struck me that Ahaz refused to ask a sign from God because he did not want to do whatever it was that God would ask of him. In a very real sense, Ahaz wanted to make something that was possible for God impossible. On the other hand, Mary asked God for a sign because she wanted to do whatever God asked of her. In other words, Mary wanted God to make the impossible possible.

This theme of giving ourselves over to the will of God so that He might make the impossible possible is continued in today's other readings. Joseph is faced with the impossible task of deciding what to do about his fiancé who is suddenly pregnant with someone else's baby. According to Mosaic law, he could have had her stoned to death for adultery, but instead he decides to try and divorce her quietly. Then, amazingly, he has a dream in which an angel tells Joseph that Mary conceived a child through the Holy Spirit and that he must take Mary into his home. This seems impossible and it would have been easy for Joseph to dismiss this dream, but when he woke "he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home."

Like Ahaz and Mary, we too are often faced with seemingly impossible situations in our lives. We are faced with problems in the world and our nation... problems in our families and at work... problems in our own minds and hearts. The question is whether we are like Ahaz or Mary. Are we like Ahaz, refusing to bring our problems to God, refusing to act in faith so that it becomes impossible for God to act in our lives? Or are we instead like Mary, coming to God with our needs and asking Him to work His will in our lives so that He can make the impossible possible? As people of faith, we are called to approach God with the seeming impossibilities in our lives so that His power might work through us to make them possible.

God wants us to come to Him so that He can work powerfully in our lives, so that these signs of His love can serve as a sign of something much greater, the truth that He has sent His Son among us to free us from our sins and bring us to salvation. This, in the end, is the true gift of Christmas that we must long and pray for with all of our hearts. And so we say, "Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Savior."