

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 4th Sunday Advent Year B2

I wonder what Mary was doing at that exact moment when the angel Gabriel entered her world! Have you ever been going about your daily activities, when something breaks in and makes such an impression that, not only will you never forget that moment, but you will never be the same?

For example, where were you, what were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001? Or maybe for an older generation, how about noon, November 22, 1963-what were you doing then (assassination of John F Kennedy)?

In college one day as I sat in my Criminology class, our professor was lecturing on criminal prosecutions and the questionable reliability of eyewitness statements even with profound events, and I mentioned being in a high school classroom, when I heard my teacher say that the first space shuttle Challenger had just exploded after takeoff from Cape Canaveral. My college professor jumped in and said, "What? you weren't even born yet?" And I responded, "Is this a test, I am sure that I remember Mrs Perry saying something about it? Really, I was in catholic high school (1-28-1986) (Later in 2003 another shuttle Columbia came apart crossing sky over Texas). No TV was brought in to show us anything. Just the announcement was made in class. I always figured it struck the teachers so deeply because one of the victims on the shuttle was the teacher Christa McAuliffe who was a special addition to the shuttle crew. It was then that my Professor looked at me puzzled and then said, "Oh yeah, I was thinking of the Apollo 1 test launch in 1967, that caused fire on the pad, killing all astronauts on board."

Reviewing such events and my memory of them, here's one that formed a deep impression: August 16, 1977, about 3:30 in afternoon. Do you remember that day? I and my neighbor Danny were having a tournament wrestling match in his living room (*this was the day of Superstar Billy Dundee-well before Hulk Hogan!*) We had put the couch cushions down on the floor, so we could jump off the back couch like the ring ropes jumping on to our opponent. The cushions were like chairs to slam over each other! Well, I was close to pinning him down for three seconds, when the TV broke into a special report and the announcer declared that Elvis was declared dead at the hospital. Danny squirmed out of hold, and went running off to tell his mother. They both returned minute later and sat somberly on couch. At that point, our Match was over. I won the WWF Belt that day – I consider he forfeited since he ended the match. I sat a while and then excused myself and went on home. They were obviously bigger fans than I was.

But this little memory exercise has me thinking "What exactly was Mary doing when the Angel Gabriel visited her at the Annunciation?" The gospel of Luke doesn't say except that Gabriel surprised her. Nearly all artwork and paintings depict Mary either in a garden, a room in a home, or in a temple

portico, holding a book (prayerbook-psalms?) kneeling or sitting in a chair when the Angel Gabriel appears. But since the scriptures don't specifically say, I am curious what Mary was doing when that event happened, forever changing her?

Could she have been working in the kitchen on dinner? Could she have been milking a goat in the yard/barn? Could she have been working among the garden planting or picking produce? Or was she praying in meditation in the Temple? Or taking up her daily morning prayers? We get the impression that since she and Angel dialogue with each other, that she was alone? But was she truly in deep personal private prayer, or busy about domestic work or duties?

The scripture doesn't indicate **what** she was doing when it all happened. An early church document/tradition called the Proto-Gospel of James dated to about mid 100's, records that Mary was quite the seamstress and was busy in the house, making a special golden & white linen veil that was commissioned to her by the Temple Priests. She had paused to go draw water from a well with a pitcher when Gabriel appeared (chapter 10-11). Afterward, she finished the commissioned project (of course!), gave it to priests and then left to visit Elizabeth. But according to this early church tradition, Mary was diligently busy at work chores, sewing a new temple veil (*likely same one that's torn as Jesus dies*) when Gabriel came that day.

My point in bringing this up, about what Mary was actually doing, either actively praying or being busy at her life's chores, is that either way, Mary reveals all through her life, the special gift and secret of keeping our souls centered on God regardless of what we are doing.-it is praying no matter what we are doing, as long as we are focused on uniting our wills to God's will! Concentrating on God's presence, having prayerful disposition whether we are in the Temple explicitly offering worship or are busy in the workshop fulfilling our daily duties – that can all be prayer, because God is in it (that's really what Christmas celebrates - God entering our lives!) This is what St Paul later refers to as 'Praying at all times' (Ephesians 6:18) or 'Praying unceasingly'(1 Thess 5:16). It is the keeping ever before our eyes, an awareness of the presence of God. How do we do that? Mary teaches us, I believe. Mary shares with us the gift example of self-surrender to God in our work: "I am the handmaid of the Lord-let it be done to me according to your word". Whatever I am doing, by telling myself, it is for God's Glory, It is His will, for His Service, then it will be both work and worship. The Spiritual writer Brother Lawrence calls it 'Practicing the Presence of God'. Nuns in the convent call it, "Recollection" and modernists today call it 'mindfulness'. It amounts to being aware and consciously in contact with God, regardless of what we are doing

– if in silent, interior prayer then great your are there already, but also even if involved in active work, a person can feel communion with God- if you take up that duty as the instigated call from God, (I am doing this for God) then that activity is prayer too. I mean, by prayer, the fact that I am conscious of His presence. I trusting that God is with me, guiding me – St Therese Lisieux called it her ‘Little Way’. St Therese felt like she had nothing fantastic or spectacular to do for God, but she would do whatever she did, intentionally FOR God and attending to it with great focus. She performed every mundane, menial, act as if was handed right to her from God Himself: Even folding the napkins at the community dinner table, she was doing that for God. So with what care she tended to each fold of cloth? When doing the Convent’s laundry wash, she did it for Jesus Himself And she found such great joy in every job. Advent and Christmas try doing that for us too. By opening ourselves to see that God enters our world, then everything we do suddenly takes on the newest, freshest dimensions. Since God is with us, everything we do is FOR him. This can make our otherwise wearying daily tasks take on new life. I’m not just doing something. I am doing Jesus’ thing. That changes it all. Carrying that love of God within us in whatever chore we are doing, Mary reveals that it is all prayer – as long as we are united to God, attending to His presence (and what serenity and acceptance can come to us when we know we are doing it for God). Little though it seems, done for God it becomes great!