

“Hail Mary full of grace, blessed are you among women and blessed be the fruit of thy womb.” In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The waiting and watching of Advent is nearing its end. The nativity of our Lord approaches with haste, *ready or not Jesus is coming. Ready or not Jesus is coming!* Throughout my childhood our family summered on the North Shore of Long Island. After the beach, we often played “Hide and Seek” with our friends. A prized skill that we all tried to hone was the ability to count quickly and audibly as to conclude the count down before all limbs and shoes were tucked in out of sight. *“Ready or not here I come!”* are the words we would shout as we uncovered our eyes and ran to tag those who were not yet quite ready.

Today the fourth candle, the Love candle, the Mary candle, has been set aglow on the advent wreath. Some dismiss the story of the Annunciation and Mary’s virgin birth as mere legend. Some believe that such talk is fine in Sunday school lessons and pageants, but there the line is drawn. Does our strong emphasis on scientific proof and logic prevent our faith from being rooted in something so miraculous? Yet it was one of the greatest scientific minds of all time, Albert Einstein, who said there are two ways to view reality, the first being that nothing is a miracle and the other that everything is a miracle. Saint Augustine said that miracles abound we have only to see them. Ready or not, let us leap together; open our eyes of faith together, and behold the miracle of the Mother of God together. As we will see, Mary did some faithful leaping and stretching of her own for us!

Mary was not prepared for her celestial visit, she couldn’t hear Gabriel counting aloud, nor could she have known how much all of creation was counting on her. “Greetings, favored one!” *Ready or not*, here comes the kind of news that could fill a young unwed teen’s heart with dread and despair, the news of pregnancy. Miraculously, Mary joyfully accepted and embraced the news that Jesus was coming. Despite being caught off guard, she did not despair. Mary trusted the angel’s words and God’s plan without having all the details. (And as we will see, the devil was certainly hiding in some of those details!) In her assent to Gabriel, Mary believed Joseph would understand that *they* were going to have a child and even though *he* wasn’t going to be the biological father, *he* would still raise and love this child as his son? She miraculously believed that she would somehow be spared disgrace, rejection and even death by stoning! *Ready or not, here comes Jesus!* And Mary said she was ready!

In saying, “yes” Mary would be saying goodbye to her social virginity or innocence of being. She would no longer be the center of her universe. There would be the needs of her child to attend to. Her needs and wants would no longer come first. *Ready or not*, she was going to be a fulltime caregiver.

If our receiving of Jesus had with it the possibility of personal risk and even harm or death would we respond like Mary? For Mary, saying yes to being the Mother of our Lord was a gutsy investment that had significant risks as well as the promise of amazing returns. Elizabeth declares to Mary *“Blessed art thou among women...”* a theme that Mary affirms in her magnificent song, *“From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.”* Yet it would not be long until the cost of her fame and faithfulness would be painfully revealed.

After Jesus’ birth, and Mary’s ritual purification following that birth, they took their new son Jesus to the temple. An old man who waited for the coming of the Messiah, Simeon, stopped and blessed them. He then said unto Mary, *“Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”* **Ready or not**, Mary was hearing of the pain that was waiting for her in the not so distant future. **Ready or not** she was discovering that faith and “blessedness” would not insulate her from the harshest of realities.

Mary would do battle with jealousy. She would have to share her beloved son with so many others. She would hear Jesus refer to those he ministered to and with as his mother and brothers. She would know the pain of emotional and physical distance from one who she loved immensely.

Mary would know the helplessness of watching her child Jesus being taunted and humiliated, abused and rejected without being able to stop it. Mary witnessed her own son's murder and felt that soul piercing pain that one feels forever upon the death of a child.

Luther's love and devotion to Mary, the God bearer, began long before the death of his two daughters, Elizabeth and Magdalena, but the knowledge that Mary shared in his pain must have brought some comfort as he awaited his heavenly family reunion (and perhaps gives us comfort in our waiting). In reflecting on the miracle of the nativity, Luther looked to the person the Western Church refers to as the Last Spiritual Father, the French abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, of the Cistercian order. St. Bernard said there are three miracles to behold in the nativity, the first is that God and man should be joined in the Christ Child. The second miracle is that a mother should remain a virgin. The third miracle is that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. It is the third miracle, the miracle of faith; a faith through which all of the world's sinners would be justified and saved that caused Luther the greatest amount of rejoicing. She was a pure example of justification by *sola fide*, faith alone. Even the great reformed theologians Calvin and Zwingli followed Luther's lead and held Mary in high regard. Luther continued to celebrate the three Marian feast days, Annunciation, Purification and Visitation and even prayed the Ave Maria- "Hail Mary full of grace, blessed are you among women and blessed be the fruit of thy womb." The additions to the prayer, "pray for us sinners, now and at the time of our death" was added following the reformation by the Carthusians and was not known by Luther. This being said, it is interesting to note however, that once when Luther nearly bled to death after accidentally cutting his leg with his short sword he called out and prayed to Mary, Mother of Our Lord. Just as, according to legend, he called out to Saint Anne to save him in the midst of a violent thunderstorm. In both cases, Luther survived to pray another day.

Ready or not, the Christ Mass is almost here. We will sing about Mary the Theotokos, the God bearer. Her womb bore the fruit that would become the bread of life and the cup of salvation- fruit that will nourish us again this day as we share in Holy Communion. Our Lord nursed at Mary's breast and grew strong enough to love us to death and then to life again. It was through Mary that Yahweh would honor the covenant that he made to our ancestor David. It was through Mary that God became man.

Ready or not, our Christmas gatherings will uncover pain that we have been carrying with us. Some of us will think upon the Holy Family and we will miss our mother, or father or child. We will notice the empty chairs around our table that were once full with personality and life. We will be more aware of strained and broken relationships and the dire need for reconciliation and restoration.

What if God sent us a messenger to ask if we would surrender our fear and pain, our skepticism and suspicion, our cynicism and hopelessness and see ourselves in the light of the love candle, the Mary candle today? What if we invited the Spirit of the Lord to overshadow us and impregnate us with hope that is born from complete trust? What if we allowed ourselves to not only to behold the miracle of faith in Mary, but to see ourselves as a miracle of faith this Christmas?

Ready or not God is coming among us again this year as we celebrate the miracle of Christmas. We might do our best to hide from the meaning and power, love and invitation, of Christmas, but God who stills the hands of time for us extends his own wounded, loving hand toward us. That hand comes by way of an angel, a messenger of good news. That hand is a hand up to faith.

Please extend your wounded and loving hand to the person next to you and say, "Greetings, favored one."

You are favored you know. All of this, the decorated church, the choral anthems, this community of faith, all of Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, all of this God did for you (and me). We are that favored, that loved, and that special.

The Lord is indeed with us....Amen