

At the beginning of Advent, I promised three guides to lead us through our spiritual wilderness as we go in search of Jesus. John the Baptist told us that we had to get rid of all the obstacles blocking our path. The Archangel Gabriel challenged us to follow in his footsteps by being messengers of the gospel. Our final guide is actually three guides and they want to teach and inspire us by how they responded to Gabriel's three annunciations: Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary. I am not going to take a lot of time to review their backstories; everyone should already know them. If you don't know them, your task—to be done tonight—is to read the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel and the first two chapters of Luke's gospel.

How did Zechariah respond to Gabriel's message that his wife Elizabeth was going to become the mother of John the Baptist? In spite of the fact that barren women such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and the mother of Samson all eventually gave birth to extremely important figures in salvation history (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, and Sampson), Zechariah was skeptical and he wanted proof that the same thing could happen with his own wife. He was punished by losing the ability to speak until after Elizabeth had given birth to John. One lesson we can take from Zechariah's response is that we should think before we open our mouths. Another lesson is that when we pray for something, we need to give God time to work and to expect him to answer our prayers in unexpected ways. The third lesson is that we need time before we can fully comprehend what God is doing in our lives. Those nine months of silence gave Zechariah the perspective he needed. As John the Baptist grew in Elizabeth's womb, the prophetic words of God grew in Zechariah's heart and mind to the point that when John was finally born, Zechariah was full of the Holy Spirit and burst out with his canticle defining John's mission and promising the light of Christ to all of those living in darkness.

Mary first responded to Gabriel's annunciation by asking how she could become pregnant since she had no relations with a man. There is some mystery about why Mary asked that question. She was a virgin, betrothed but not yet living with her husband Joseph. According to Jewish custom at the time, after the betrothal period of a year, Joseph and Mary would have lived together and in the natural course of events, she would have become pregnant. Was there some cue that Mary picked up on which told her that this was going to happen immediately before she moved in with Joseph? Or was she intending to remain a virgin even after the betrothal period was over? What does that say about her marriage to Joseph? While the church does proclaim as dogma the perpetual virginity of

Mary, there are different ways those questions could be answered, including the possibility that Gabriel's message caused Mary and Joseph to change their plan for their life together. There are a number of theories about this but the scriptures don't answer this question and I am not going to speculate on it any further here.

Mary's response to Gabriel was not skepticism or a request for proof, but simply a request for more information which the angel provided. Once the plan was explained, Mary, of her own free will, said yes to God's plan (she could have said no) and then went in haste to be with Elizabeth, carrying the newly conceived Jesus with her as she went. God's plans for our lives are usually less clear than he made them to Mary. Do we ask for his guidance? When those plans begin to take shape, how do we respond? Mary's yes made her a living tabernacle as she carried the presence of God in her womb. We are living tabernacles as well because we carry the eucharistic body of Jesus within us. Are we aware of His presence and do we act accordingly?

Finally we come to the annunciation to Joseph. The Church acknowledges three potential explanations for Joseph's desire to divorce Mary quietly before Gabriel appeared to him in a dream: the suspicion theory, the perplexity theory, and the reverence theory. All three theories have proponents among the church fathers and great theologians. Last Wednesday's Daily Mass homily explains these theories and I put it on the parish website if you want to look it up. I prefer the reverence theory which essentially says that Joseph knew that it was through the Holy Spirit that Mary became pregnant and he did not consider himself worthy of being a part of God's plan so he decided to step aside as Mary's husband. Once Gabriel explained the situation to him, Joseph understood and acted according to the angel's words. And he continued to do so after Jesus' birth when threatened by Herod.

God probably doesn't send an angel to speak to us in dreams the way he spoke to Joseph. He does speak to us though, through the teachings of the church. How do we respond to those teachings? Do we complain about them or ignore the ones we don't like? Or do we ask the Holy spirit to help us convert our hearts and act on those teachings the way Mary, Joseph and eventually Zechariah acted on the messages of the angel? How do we respond to God's messengers in our own lives?

Saints Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary, pray for us.