

Called: A vocational Advent

Part One: The Blessed Virgin Mary

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One of the great paradoxes about God is that while, thanks to theologians and mystics and our own spiritual life, we know a million things about him, those million things, even taken all together, don't even begin to accurately describe him. On the one hand, he's the only thing we know; on the other, utter mystery. But out of all those million things, two stick out, since they're at the very core of salvation history: 1) God loves us, and 2) he wants to be near to us. This is, basically, the entire "plot" of the Bible: God keeps trying to love us, keeps trying to be near us, and we keep responding to that love in various satisfactory and not-so-satisfactory ways.

And one of main ways he keeps trying to be near us is by calling us. Right from the beginning, first thing after Adam sinned, "The Lord God then called to him and said, 'Where are you?'" He's always calling us back to our better selves, our best selves; calling us to participate in the perfection of his plan. He's called us through prophets, through priests, through kings. But he called us most clearly—and drew most near to us—in the Incarnation of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And the Incarnation, as the central event of all time, all space, was marked by very special callings to very special people. Ordinary people, most of them, but the calling made them special—and their response to the call made them extraordinary. Because their response was not simply to say yes, but to let God change their whole lives and to use those new lives to change the world. Their response was a vocation.

This Advent series is going to take a look at four unique callings that are central to the Christmas story. The first is that of the Blessed Virgin Mary...

God's plan, while it may be mysterious to us (the Bible is a record of our trying to figure it out), is nonetheless a plan, and as such has certain recognizable patterns, vocation being one of them. It's tempting to say it's just Four Easy Steps, but, since God's call is a call to radical change, they're rarely easy. But they are, in the end, filled with the joy that comes with conforming to God's will, and in that sense the Annunciation provides a perfect template for vocation.

The first step, of course, is the call itself, whether it comes via a burning bush, an ecstatic vision, or being knocked off a horse (how wonderful it must have been for God, as Jesus, to simply walk up to a fisherman and say, "Follow me."). At the Annunciation it was the Angel Gabriel greeting Mary with, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." And St. Luke tells us that Mary was troubled by this greeting, which is understandable. If we're greeted in a whole new way, that indicates we're expected to respond in a whole new way. Our status quo is about to be challenged, and that can be upsetting, even threatening. There's no record of God sending angels to tell us everything's going to stay the same.

The next step is that Mary "ponders within herself what this greeting [calling] might mean"—what we nowadays would call discernment. In a sense, this step is the grounding for all the others, since it indicates a pre-existing and well-nourished interiority; pre-existing because, if Mary hadn't already had a firmly grounded relationship with God, he would have had no place from which to speak to her and she would have had no place quiet enough, open enough to hear him. So it's significant that this where she goes to ponder the meaning of God's call. As always, we would do well to imitate her. If God is asking us to move deeper into the world (i.e., to more radically witness to his love for the world), we first have to move deeper into ourselves: to see if the voice now asking something new of us matches the voice we've come to know in personal prayer and through the intimate texture of our entire life.

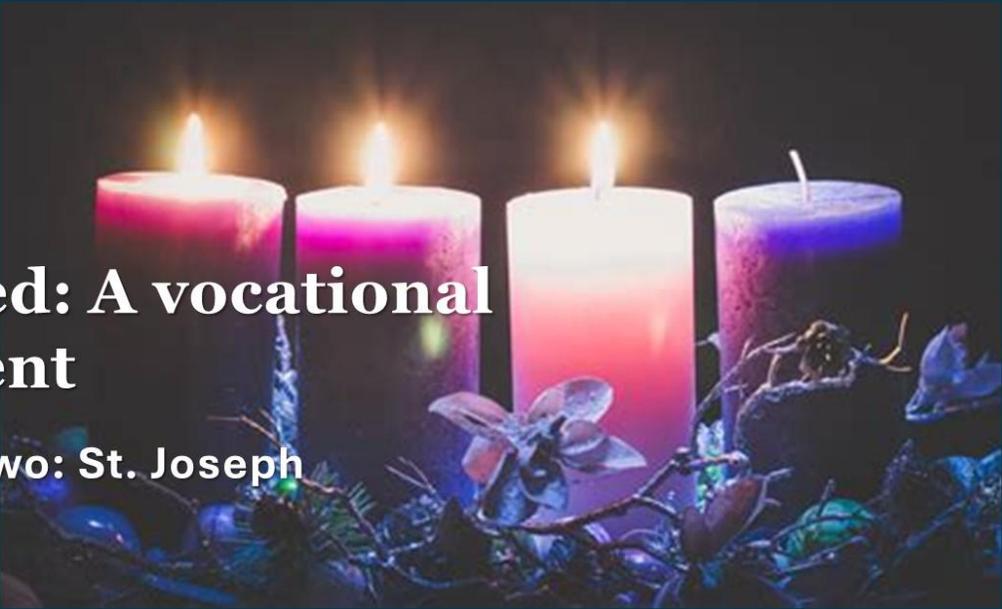
God built a certain practicality into human nature, a desire to know how things work, to figure things out. Mary is tapping into this in the third step of vocation when she asks "How shall this be?" A consideration of the practical aspects of the calling is a natural part of discernment. Moses told God he didn't have the speaking skills to confront Pharaoh—though he also just didn't want' to go back to Egypt. But Mary's not trying to get out of the calling. She's just admitting she doesn't understand how it can be achieved. Confronted by utter mystery, she's asking a very human, very practical question. Gabriel gives two answers to her question: a direct answer—she will conceive by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit—and another answer that pulls her back to mystery: "For nothing is impossible with God." It should be noted that there's also a healthy humility in this human practicality: we're admitting that we're highly unlikely candidates for what's being asked of us. And, though it's sort of a left-handed compliment, it seems God is saying, "You're

such an unlikely candidate, I've just *got* to use you." The good news is that we're all unlikely candidates and God's plan is to use all of us.

And the final step is Mary's simple, straightforward yes, her utter surrender to the will of God: "Let it be done to me according to your word." In that yes, all of human freedom was redeemed. That extraordinary gift; that share in God's perfect freedom; that gift that was tarnished in Eden and trampled underfoot through all of history—was purified and renewed by her simple yes, by her humble agreement to play a central role in salvation history, her willingness to become the gateway of The Divine. And we have only to imitate her simplicity, her trust, her leap into the life of God to fulfill our own vocation

And when the Angel Gabriel departed, Mary enjoyed the strange and joyous aftertaste of the vocational moment: she not only knew that somehow her life had just changed forever; she also knew that somehow all of life itself had changed, all of history. She says so in the Magnificat: "For behold, from this day forward all generations shall call me blessed." But she doesn't know why. And the only way she can test out this new feeling, embrace it, is by moving out into this suddenly transfigured world to see if it reflects, responds to the profound change at the very heart of her. So she goes to her kinswoman Elizabeth and, at very sound of her voice, an unborn prophet leaps for joy in the womb.

When we have heard our own call, said our own yes, we can only hope and pray that, like Mary, as we move into the world with our precious secret, we too might make others feel something in them jump for joy at the new life we carry within us. When they sense the Christ.



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Part Two: St. Joseph

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The calling of St. Joseph unfolded in two phases, the first of which, as unsettling and life changing as it was in its own right, in the end was merely a foreshock of the second's major earthquake. It's said that God tests those he loves. In that case, it's clear he loved St. Joseph very much.

It's not recorded how exactly Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. We don't know if he noticed it on his own (or someone else in Nazareth noticed it and he heard the gossip) or if Mary told him. And if she told him, we don't know what she said—or if he believed it. What we do know is that he went from preparing a home for the woman he loved to suddenly having the legal right to have her put to death. Instead of exercising this right, he opted instead to divorce her quietly, and St. Matthew tells us he came to this decision because "he was a righteous man".

The concept of righteousness has fallen on hard times in contemporary culture. Roughly, it means "doing the right thing", but more importantly doing it out of a strong bond—a relationship, really—with a moral or religious code. Such codes are now generally considered repressive, outmoded, or simply invalid by secular society, but in the Jewish culture of St. Joseph's time, righteousness was considered the fruit of a deep and abiding relationship with the Living God and his law. Abraham is the first person in the Bible to be called righteous. Moses was righteous.

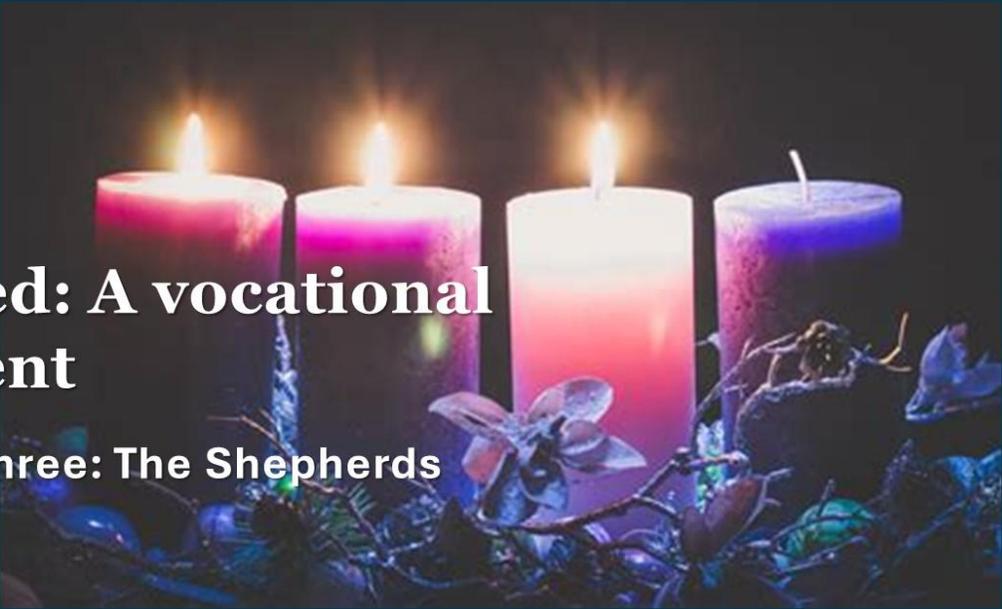
King David. So just as Mary turned inward to her relationship with God to discern the answer to her call, so also Joseph turned inward, turned to that deep place where he knew God and God knew him, to discern his—and the indication of this is that his decision showed mercy instead of judgment. It showed love. No matter how much Mary may have hurt him, he still loved her intensely. He still wanted to protect her.

But God was by no means through with St. Joseph, and the second part of his calling brings the Angel Gabriel back on the scene—this time in a dream. God often communicates through dream and sleep states throughout the Old and New Testaments, and Matthew records five such dreams in his infancy narrative, among which four of them are St. Joseph's. And while the language of dreams can often be elliptical, Gabriel cuts right to the chase: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

In terms of discernment, perhaps Joseph tossed and turned in his sleep after the dream. For that matter, perhaps he lapsed into the deepest, most peaceful sleep of his life. (Peace is a clear indicator of a successful discernment.) At any rate, St. Matthew tells us that immediately upon waking, he did exactly as the angel had told him. *Vocation leads to action*. When you suddenly have an entirely new life, you want to try it out—immediately. And St. Joseph certainly had an entirely new life. In the space of a day or so he had gone from being a man with a failed marriage to being the foster father of the Messiah. He was going to teach the Son of the Creator how to be a carpenter. He was going to teach the Word of God how to read Scripture. He was going to teach a child conceived by the Holy Spirit how to be righteous.

We too have an entirely new life. It was given to us at baptism. And, no offense to the Angel Gabriel, but we don't need a dream. We've got the Kingdom of God. Jesus told us: it's right here; it's among us. Always has been; always will be. We just have to go out and show it to other people, every single day, every way we can. We just have to wake up—and move.

Then we'll be righteous, too.



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Part Three: The Shepherds

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It's said that God writes straight with crooked lines, and the Infancy Narrative is abundant with them: zigs and zags all over the place, all somehow pointing to the central moment of history: the birth of the Christ. To human understanding it makes little or no sense that God would make his plan for salvation contingent on the agreement of a teenage girl. It doesn't seem to make sense that he would entrust the care and upbringing of the Savior of the World to a village handyman. And it borders on absurdity that he would choose shepherds as the first witnesses to the Incarnation.

Shepherds were generally considered to be uneducated, uncouth, and most important of all, unclean. Their daily contact with dirty, smelly sheep, with manure, with blood from cuts and scrapes, and with insects buzzing around the flock placed shepherds well beyond the bounds of Judaism's laws about ritual purity. If Luke 2 were to be given a contemporary reworking, the angels would announce Jesus' birth to garbagemen.

Yet God doesn't seem to have any problem with shepherds at all. On the contrary, significant figures in Jewish religious history were shepherds. The Old Testament tells us that Abraham had extensive flocks of sheep as well as herds of livestock; Moses was tending sheep when he was summoned by the Burning Bush; and David came in from tending sheep when Samuel recognized him as the future king of Israel. The psalms, most famously Psalm 23, are rich with shepherding imagery. And Jesus, of course, not only had several parables in which shepherds played central

roles, but even referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. And certainly Jesus knew how dirty shepherds were.

So perhaps it was God's special fondness for shepherds, or perhaps because he knew he was dealing with simple men—or maybe simply because it was Christmas—but his calling of the shepherds was divinely over the top. Unlike Gabriel's visits to Mary and Joseph, God sent a skyful of angels to announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds, an all-singing, all-glorifying divine fireworks display lighting up the midnight sky. And yes, the shepherds had their moment of fear, but their discernment, like Mary's, like Joseph's, was brief. As soon as the angels departed, they turned to one another and said, in their holy simplicity, "Let's go see this thing," and St. Luke tells us "they went in haste."

Luke must have loved telling this story. A former pagan, possibly a convert to Judaism before he converted to Christianity, he was writing to a pagan audience whose participation in the new religion had been a matter of some controversy. So it's probably no coincidence that he peppers his gospel with unclean outsiders (e.g., the Good Samaritan, the leper who's the only one out of ten cleansed to thank Jesus); that he should begin his account of the Savior's life with dirty shepherds proclaiming the Good News and end it with a condemned criminal as the first to enter Paradise with Jesus. This is a gospel only a former pagan could write, someone who knew how good salvation felt to a dirty outsider.

The good news here is that just about all of us, if we look back far enough, have a bit of the dirty outsider, of the pagan in us. (Full Disclosure: The author's roots go back to tree-worshiping Saxons who were the bane of Charlemagne.) We're *all* St. Luke's audience, all crooked lines, all shepherds. But what's to be remembered is that the story of the shepherds ends with them telling everyone they met what they had seen. We're told that many were amazed (Luke is the Great Cheerleader of the New Testament), but it's also likely that many thought it was just a crazy story from some shepherds. Maybe they even laughed at them. If so, the shepherds didn't care. They knew what had been told them. They knew what they had seen. They knew that they would never be the same again.

Neither will we.



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Part Four: The Wise Men

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Part Four— The Wise Men

With the Wise Men we finally come to the vocation story that's closest to our own: God gets their attention, as he at some point in our lives gets ours, by putting something in their life they're drawn to but can't quite explain; something that intrigues them, mystifies them; challenges them. At certain moments they think they've got it figured out; at others, they just don't have a clue. All they know is that something strange and beautiful and powerful has just come into their life, and somehow they've got to find out what it's saying to them, what it's offering. Demanding. So they move toward it, follow its light, allow themselves to be guided by its mystery. It's a long slog, but they hang in there. And finally, in the end, they encounter Christ and their lives are utterly transformed. They give him gifts, they give him their journey, every moment that led to him, and they "go home another way" because, as Bishop Sheen put it, "*No one ever comes to Christ and goes back the same way he came.*"

No one knows exactly who or what the Magi were. (We do know, contrary to nativity sets around the world, that they weren't kings.) "Magus" has a broad spectrum of meanings. On the high end, the Greeks used it to refer to a members of a (probably Persian) priestly class; on the low, there's a magus mentioned in *Acts of the Apostles* who's a total charlatan, a local magician. In between, which is where our Magi fall, they were men of deep religious and philosophical understanding who applied that understanding to their pre-scientific observation of the natural world. (But no, not really astrologers.)

St. Matthew, similar to telling his Jewish audience that Joseph was “just” (or “righteous”), trusting that the word would tap into an entire complex of cultural and religious resonances, simply tells us that these “men from the East” were wise. But wisdom, like righteousness, had a quite different meaning for 1st century Jews than it has for us today. For us, wisdom, such as it is, has been relegated to an endless series of expert (or even just celebrity) opinions or, for something more “spiritual”, to self-help slogans. But for Judaism, wisdom had far deeper roots, roots that went back to the very beginning of Creation—and in fact preceded it.

In the Bible, wisdom is described as “a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness” (Wis 7:25-26). In the *Book of Proverbs*, Wisdom is personified and tells us, “From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, before the earth began. When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth, when no springs were overflowing with water.” (Prv 8:23-25). And, speaking of watery depths, the very beginning of the *Book of Genesis* also seems to be referencing Wisdom with, “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”—but now Wisdom is the very Spirit of God. As Catholics, this can only remind us that the first gift of the Holy Spirit is Wisdom, which gives us the power to see the world as God sees it, to recognize truth, and to use that truth to the glory of God.

This is what made the Wise Men wise. This is what told them that the birth of a new star was a sign of some far greater birth that nature itself was compelled to announce, a birth that in fact had changed nature entirely. This is what gave them a holy restlessness, that got them to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles because they sensed they were finally seeking something far beyond any earthly wisdom. And they is why they brought gifts.

We too have gifts to bring. We too have a star to follow. We only need the wisdom—and the grace—to follow it.

A blessed Christmas to all!

(Written by Jeffrey Essmann)