

**Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 22-23, 2018, Cycle C**

The Gospel today is the story of the Visitation: Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, both heavy with babies in the womb. As Mary and the unborn Savior approach, "Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit cried out in a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'" Elizabeth reports that her infant, whom we will know is John the Baptist, leaped in her womb for joy.

To appreciate this scene more fully, we have to go back to how Israel experienced God's presence most profoundly. Recall that Moses created a movable temple or tabernacle. Inside the tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant, where the spirit of Yahweh hovered. King David himself was so much in awe of the Ark that he hesitated even to bring it to Jerusalem: "How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?" he asked (2 Sam 6:9).

In Luke's Gospel, we find the archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35) as it did over the Ark of the Covenant. And in today's Gospel, Elizabeth's response as Mary approaches is virtually David's, "How does this happen to me that the mother of the most high should come to me?"

Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant. Many of us here remember singing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary at May crownings! One of the Marian titles we would sing was "Ark of the Covenant" pray for us. Mary is a living Ark, whose very presence, carrying the Lord in her womb, overwhelms Elizabeth, and her unborn son, John. Elizabeth says to Mary: "...the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy."

Mary is very important in the Christmas story for she prefigures all disciples of Jesus. The Second Vatican council teaches us that in Mary we contemplate the fullness of our own truth, the fullness of our mystery as disciples, even while still on pilgrimage to God's Kingdom. In other words, we are Arks bearing God's presence into the world!

Can this be true? We are Arks of the new covenant, like Mary, bearing Jesus into the world – in our own ways mothers of God? St. Paul certainly thought so! Paul tells us that by baptism we have become temples of the Holy Spirit – meaning that God dwells in us, as He dwelled in Mary, as He dwelled in the Ark of the old Covenant in the Temple in Jerusalem. Following Mary's example of obedience, we are to bear the God who is present within us into the world on a daily basis. And like Mary, we bear God into the world in our own ordinary ways.

Peter Feldmeier, who teaches Catholic studies at the University of Toledo, tells of his experience of God – bearing Arks at the Cherry Street Mission in Toledo, Ohio. He tells of Nancy, the head cook and guide of Cherry Street mission, who daily prepares meals for the homeless and coordinates the volunteers. Peter says, Nancy loves the guests and even prays openly with them. She also exhibits the patience of Job. Christ is very alive and present in Nancy, as Christ was alive in Mary.

Another Mary – like figure Peter tells about is Mike, one of the homeless guests at Nancy's Mission. He says one day Mike put his arm over my shoulder and with great love wanted to know how I was, and how my day was going. Peter said, I felt overwhelmed by Mike's concern; I didn't know how much I needed his arm around me that day, but I did. Did Mike know? Or was he in his own lowliness, like Mary, simply being the God – bearer he was?

There are only a couple of days left before we begin our Christmas celebration, and the Church is wise to call on us to stay close to Mary in the final days before Christmas. Even in the frantic preparations of the last few days, we should take the time to rest with Mary and with her ponder the mystery of it all. For, ultimately Mary shows us who we are, who we carry within us, and who we ourselves bear into the world!