

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies.

During the first three weeks of this season of Advent, we've heard stories of hope and beginning involving communities of people. We've heard Isaiah's words of comfort and encouragement, and of urgent, joyful action to the exiles of Babylon. We've seen the Jewish community in Roman Palestine respond to the ministry of John the Baptist, meeting him in the desert in acts of repentance and in anticipation of the coming of the Anointed One of God. We've read the letters written to the early church communities assuring them of God's faithfulness, steadfastness and patience, and of the believers' gratitude and joy that these small, scattered communities are continuing to faithfully walk in the way of Jesus.

This week, we turn from the words and works of communities and peoples, to very intimate stories of individuals. We start with David, a young shepherd from a minor family of a small tribe of Israel. David has gone far from his beginnings and is now king; he wonders what he should do next, and turns his attention to building a temple for God to replace the movable tent that has served as the dwelling-place of God on earth for generations.

But God speaks through a prophet, Nathan, to give direction to David.

You've done the work that was yours to do, God tells him; now is the time for God to work through other people. Take your rest, David; God has plans and purpose for others to take up.

Then we have our Gospel. We are given the very intimate story of a young girl from a small, backwater village encountering an angel with a message that perplexes her. You are favoured! declares the angel. What can this mean, this young girl from a small, backwater village wonders. It sounds as if God has chosen her to be part of the promise God made ages and ages ago to David, the promise that God had plans and purpose for others to take up and that *she* was one of those others. How can this be? Mary wonders. The angel tells her not to be afraid, and that nothing is impossible with God. Then the angel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Mary responds with the same words that the prophets before her have used to respond to the call of God: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

These stories remind me that the plans and purpose of God are a dynamic dance, an interaction and interdependence between us as individuals and

us collectively as a community. We, each of us, need to nurture our intimate, personal dialogue with God, so that when God calls us we can hear. We need to make time to be still, to be silent; to pray and to rest; to contemplate; and to speak and act in such a way that we are each prepared, body, mind, and spirit, to receive the word of God when it comes to us.

We don't know the exact nature of the personal dialogue Mary kept with God; but we know that it was tended well enough that though perplexed and maybe a little frightened by the visitation of the angel, she was nonetheless prepared to hear and then bear the Word of God. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Mary says yes to this, without knowing the process or the eventual outcome; she goes forward in the faith that the anointing of the Holy Spirit will be enough to see her through the work that God is giving her to do. And so the power of God overshadows her; and God's Word is made flesh and comes among us.

God invites us daily into such a relationship; one in which we sustain a dialogue with God, and our personal, intimate knowledge of God's voice

becomes part of a dynamic, interdependent dance with the work of our communities, however God forms them. With God's power overshadowing us, we can bear the Word into the world, we can embody the Good News that fulfils God's promise of the ages, that God will plant us, and grow us, and bring us into a world unafflicted by evil and crowned with peace.

This Advent's lessons have shown us many beginnings; the beginning of Mary's journey will be celebrated more fully later this week with the birth of Jesus. We meet her now in a moment entirely characterised by possibility, by the unknown, and by the *yes*. May we remember to rejoice in these moments when we encounter them in our lives. May we listen, may we pray, may we rest, and may we act moment by moment, day by day, in remembrance of the words of prophets, and in anticipation of the coming of Christ within and among us. May our dialogue with God be constant and curious and willing so that when God calls us to our work as individuals or in our communities we can respond beyond knowing and beyond fear, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Amen.