

Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Sunday December 21st 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“It’s Not Easy To Dream”

Luke 1:24 *“But how can this be?”* the question asked by the hesitant, trembling Mary of the forthright, unexpected visitor, the angel Gabriel.

I said last week, *“The promise of God to his people is that they dream dreams, and see visions. He gives the promise because He knows full well that we need it – we neglect it at our peril! And whether this is called living with passion, or following the bliss – this divine promise is surely crucial to the human spirit. Without this promise of a dream, the human spirit begins to wither and die; without this promise of a dream the present day becomes dark as the future carries no light”*. Well, in today’s Gospel Mary is indeed presented with an awesome dream... *“the child to be born of you will be holy; he will be called the Son of God”*.

Surely Mary’s understandable response is also our response when we have the beginnings of the awareness of the dreams which God presents to us – divine dreams of promise given to me, to you, to this Church... divine dreams given out of love... like Mary we respond *“but how can this be?”*.

“But how can this be... I am unworthy”. Chapter 1:28-29 (The Message Translation) *“Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: ‘Good morning! You’re beautiful with God’s beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you’. She was thoroughly shaken”*. One reason we find it difficult to receive and believe the dreams that God has for us is because we feel that we are unworthy, unsuitable, unlovable to receive such precious gifts. I remember the rather silly, but harmless, game I would sometimes play in large theatres or concert halls... I would look up into a crowd and then point and mouth the words *“hello”*... the person to whom I pointed would generally look around but then, after a while, would realize I was speaking to them... what happened next varied! God is always speaking to us but we feel sure, though sad, that we must be mistaken and he must be speaking to another person. No, the message to Mary was *“The Lord is with you!”*. The message to each of us today is the same, *“The Lord is with you!”*. He is on your side, he will come to your defense, he will always be with you and he will give to you dreams that he will fulfill.

“But how can this be... I am uncomfortable”. Chapter 1:29 *“The angel said, ‘Mary you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you.’”*. In the face of the dreams, the promises, that God has for us we are often moved and tempted, drawn and seduced to fear, to be uncomfortable within our deepest psyche. We fear disappointment as we remember the past; we fear disappointment as we contemplate the future. On March 27th 2009 the Church of the Holy Trinity celebrates its 150th Birthday! Doubtless there have been many times when a dream has been shared by some ‘newcomer’ and he/she has received the response, *“Oh we tried that, it didn’t work”*. And so because of fear of failure, fear of courteous ridicule the dream is put aside, discarded, shelved and left to gather dust. I guess we all fear those damning words, *“But I told you so”*. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we should be excited, energized, encouraged to dream great dreams for God. And, yes, even despite the unfolding and depressing gloom of financial news we must not lose the capacity to dream... or else, what we will hand on to generations to come?

“But how can this be... I am unable”. Chapter 1:34 *“Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*. I can almost imagine Mary saying to the angel, in not too contemporary parlance, *“Get real”*. Why is it that the term “dreamer” so often indicates a term of opprobrium, disapproval, ridicule? Perhaps because “dreamers” often seem so out of touch with reality... and here is Mary’s conundrum. I cannot believe this promise, this dream, because I am physically unable for it to be fulfilled. In today’s reading from 2 Samuel David seems to be out of touch with reality... he has a dream (7:2) to build a house for God “See, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent”. It needs the prophet Nathan to tell David... this dream is not for you to fulfill, you are unable to do this. But nevertheless David is given a dream which is really same content, different shape (v. 16) “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” – and with the word of God, David was able to fulfill this glorious dream.

We say to God, in so many words, *“O Lord, you give me a dream... but I feel unworthy, uncomfortable, unable”*.

And God replies to us, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”*.

Here is the great news of this fourth Sunday of Advent, here is the great news which we celebrate in a few days time... the same Spirit of God that presents to us the dream, that same Spirit will move in us to receive and believe the dream and that same Spirit will hover over us (as over creation at the beginning of time) and will bring forth in us divine dreams. But especially one divine dream above all...

We receive the Word of God as fully and as deeply as we can... and in us is born anew the Christ and Him we carry to the world... listen to the dream shared with David by the God he loved and served, *“The people of God will live in their own place and be disturbed no more, I [the Lord] will give them rest from all their enemies”* (2 Samuel 7:11).

So let us, please God, by the power of the Holy Spirit be like Mary... as we surrender to God and to His Word... here is the greatest dream made possible by divine love and power. AMEN