In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” These are the words which close our gospel reading for today, the final Sunday of Advent. And they are the words that Mary proclaims near the end of her visit from the “Angel of the Lord”. I would also suggest that they are some of the most courageous words to be found in all of scripture. They are words that tell of a deep faith, a heartfelt trust in God despite all evidence to the contrary. Faith like what Mary is exhibiting in her words requires tremendous courage.

Mary was probably named Miriam, after the sister of Moses, and was probably called that in her life. She was born in Nazareth, a small Galilean town of about 1,600 people, during the reign of Herod the Great, a violent puppet-king propped up by Roman military might. Nazareth was of little consequence for most Jews. It is never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, nor in the Talmud.

She was probably around the age of 13 when she was promised in marriage to Joseph, a carpenter who was probably much older. She may or may not have known him. They were both members of a class which contained 90% of the population, a peasant class made of farmers and craftsmen and whose function in society was to support the wealthy. Thus they suffered a triple level tax burden; Rome, Herod and the Temple in Jerusalem, to which they would have paid 10% of their earnings.

Her life, to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, was nasty, brutish and short. Women were married at such a young age in order to maximize their child bearing years. Mary’s life expectancy would have been around 30 years, so there wasn’t much time to waste.

Mary was not fragile, she was not “Mary meek and mild.” She had been working for ten hours a day for as long as she could remember. She was a peasant woman who would be capable of walking the hill country of Judea while pregnant, of giving birth in a stable, of making a four- or five-day journey on foot to Jerusalem once a year or so, of sleeping in the open country like other pilgrims and of engaging in daily hard labor at home.

And yet, as hard and short and pre-determined as her life was, she had to have been a woman of great faith and courage. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Perhaps it was not in her nature to question the authority of this strange angel who was appearing before her with this rather bazaar news. At least not question him too much. She did ask that one question, “How can this be…?” But she was satisfied with his answer: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you…”

“Here am I…let it be with me according to your word…” Some of the most courageous words in scripture. Words that reflect an almost unimaginable faith, when we look at the context of Mary’s life.

One might be tempted to think of Mary’s response to the angel as defeatist. “Whatever you say dude, life isn’t all that great anyway.” But that is not the attitude Mary is displaying. We know this by what she says next. It isn’t part of our gospel reading this morning but it is our canticle, and it is the very next thing in Luke’s gospel after today’s reading. I’m speaking of the words Mary speaks to her older cousin Elizabeth, who, even though she is well beyond her child bearing years, is pregnant with Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptizer, who leaps in Elizabeth’s womb at the appearance of Mary.

Mary had every reason to approach her older cousin in fear and anger at what had befallen her. She was a pregnant virgin and there was no guarantee at all that her future husband was just going to accept this bit of news with kindness and understanding. Mary had every right to think of this encounter with the angel as just about the worst thing that could have happened.

But that was not her response. Her first words to her cousin are poetry, poetry that puts the lie to any notion that Mary was defeated or angry or anything other than a person of almost unimaginable faith. We have a name for what she said, the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” These are not the words of fear, they are a proclamation of faith that is beyond understanding and reason, and yet stand as a model of faith for all of the generations that call Mary blessed.

And they are unselfish words. She says, “The almighty has done great things for me.” And then she proceeds to tell us what the almighty has done for everyone else in the world. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” These are words of great faith not only because they are unselfish words, but also because they are words of promise, and not present reality, at least for Mary.

I have said many times that faith is not belief in a certain set of theological facts and principals. Faith is trust. Faith is radical trust in a God who will act in God’s time. Faith is the courage to embark on a pathway knowing that the fruits of our journey will not be harvested in our lifetime.

My prayer this fourth Sunday of Advent is that I can exhibit a level of faith in my own life that is a tiny but measurable percentage of the faith Mary shows in her words and life. My prayer is that I can trust God and get out of my own way enough to allow God to act within me, even if it is just a little. May God, who has given me the will to do these things, give me the grace and power to perform them.

Amen