

“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Immaculate Conception

St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

At this time of year, there’s a lot of preparation happening for the holidays. This year might be somewhat different because of the health restrictions we face, but in ordinary years, many people spend lots of time and effort getting ready for celebrations and festivities, especially as we approach the celebration of our Lord’s birth. Well, God has also been at work, preparing for the birth of our Lord. For centuries, God was reaching down and forming the people of Israel as his own chosen people, through the call of Abraham, through the anointing of kings, and through the teachings and signs of the prophets. All of this was leading up to the coming of the Holy One of God, the Savior, into our world.

But today, we celebrate the most extraordinary preparation that God undertook in that unfolding plan. You might say it was the crowning jewel, and that was the preparation of his own mother. In God’s divine plan, his Son would become one of us, would take our human nature, and so he selected one who would give him that human nature in a perfect way: Mary. In order for Mary to become the mother of God’s Son, she too was to be formed by God’s own hand. God blessed her with a singular gift of grace so that she could be holy and pure. In anticipation of his plan that she would carry his own Son and give him birth into our world, God preserved Mary from all stain of sin, even from the moment of her conception. She was made holy from the very beginning so that she could receive the Holy One of God. And she was given this grace as a preparation for the One who would redeem the whole human race by his death and resurrection. Because of this gift of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, Jesus was born into this world from a mother who was free from sin and who gave to him an untainted human nature.

We just heard the beautiful Gospel passage of the Annunciation from Luke, when Mary heard this stupendous news that she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus. But notice how the angel addressed her: “Hail, full of grace.” She was indeed full of grace, because God had prepared her from the very moment of her conception to be a worthy dwelling place for his own beloved Son. She was full of grace because she had received his divine life and was preserved from the impurity of sin. And because she was full of grace, she could be a fitting mother for Jesus, holy and undefiled. And all of this was done because God was preparing the way for Jesus to come as our Redeemer.

Everything God does is for a purpose, and it is done out of love. His plan is mysterious and sometimes remains hidden from our sight, but it always unfolds with a view to our salvation. From all eternity, God has planned for the salvation of his people by his own beloved Son, even when he knew of the sin of Adam and Eve, even when he has known of our sins too. Still God’s plan went forward, and Mary was part of that plan. Like all of us, she too is saved by the saving grace of Jesus, by the merits of his death and resurrection. And we can all rejoice that she received this grace with joy and freely said yes to God’s great gift.

All of God’s work of preparation leads up to the person of Mary, a humble, unknown maid of Nazareth. If Mary teaches us anything, it is to allow God to work in our lives as the

master craftsman, as he loving artist. She teaches us to be docile, to give him full reign over us, so that we too might be ready to receive his grace, the gift of his own divine life. Today, as we make our way through strange times and face unfamiliar challenges, let us ask our Blessed Mother Mary, the Immaculate Conception, to be with us and to show us the true way of discipleship. She is the patroness of this Cathedral church. She is the patroness of our diocese. And, she is the patroness of our nation. Like Mary, let us accept the call to holiness that God offers to each one of us, his children. And let us say with her, who is full of grace, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.”