

It is the time of year for Christmas movies, and one of my all-time favorites is an old black and white movie from 1947 starring Loretta Young, David Niven, and Cary Grant called *The Bishop’s Wife*. Perhaps you have seen it. It is the story of an Episcopal Bishop (portrayed by David Niven) who wants to honor God and serve God by building a new cathedral. In the movie he even refers to the cathedral as a “House of God” and an artist’s rendition of the cathedral rests framed on the mantle in the bishop’s office.

The bishop’s mission reminds me of David from our Old Testament reading from Samuel this morning, where David realized he was doing quite well as King, and among his many possessions was a grand house. Somewhere along the way, David realized he was living in a permanent house while the Ark of the Covenant, which represents the Presence of God in the Old Testament, and shows that God is dwelling with God’s people, was still in a movable tent. And with all the right intentions, David saw that as a problem he could fix by building God a house. Likewise, the bishop in the movie seems to take his responsibility as bishop seriously, and wants to do right by God, by building a grand cathedral that will shine like a beacon. Even in 1947, that was an expensive endeavor, and so we watch the bishop discover that the only way he can raise enough money to build the cathedral is to convince the wealthy people in the city to contribute their money to his cause. However, the bishop learns the wealthy are not so easily separated from their money and they have conditions and agendas of their own they want met through the building of the cathedral. The bishop further learns that the only way he’ll get the money for his cathedral is to sacrifice some of his own beliefs, values, and principles. Literally, he learns the cathedral will come at a pretty high cost, and he will have to sell out in order to get it. At first, he seems to be willing to do so, just as long as God’s House gets built, no matter the cost.

Then the bishop is visited by an angel (portrayed playfully by Cary Grant) who, very much like the angel Gabriel in today’s Gospel) invited the bishop to take a different path, and to see that God indeed has a house here on earth, but it isn’t grand cathedrals. God’s house, as we heard in the lovely collect for today, is where Mary showed us, in the human being who is willing to house God.

Much has been made of the section of Luke’s Gospel we just heard, where a virgin named Mary was visited by the angel who announces God is with Mary and wants her to have a baby. This scene has even been given its own name, the Annunciation, and has been interpreted by many artists, musicians, writers, and theologians. Sometimes I wonder if it has been over interpreted in that we miss the obvious.

A lot has been made about Mary being a virgin. And it is no wonder, as the word virgin appears three times in the few lines of Luke's Gospel we just heard. Usually this opens up the seasonal controversy of the virgin birth, which skeptics love to challenge as eagerly as those children who love to question the existence of Santa Claus. But I wonder if they also miss the point. Now, believers of the virgin birth please don't get upset and start saying Mother Deborah is a heretic or anything. I'm not about to take on a church doctrine on a morning like this where we have so much to do. Instead, I am going to invoke the practice of wonder, to look at what it means to be a virgin other than in the strict biological sense. Because I believe there is a connection between such virginity and the house of God.

You see, the word virgin is used to describe things other than human beings. When someone goes exploring in a place no one has been before, or enters into the unknown we say they are going into "virgin territory". Virgin can mean new, unknown, and open. Last week in our Advent devotional there was a helpful reflection about two types of mindsets: what the author called beginners mindset and expert mindset. The beginner mindset, the author proposes, is open to seeing even old things differently rather than the expert who has already decided what a person or situation will be like even before they have experienced it. I believe what the author of our devotional was talking about in that beginner's mindset could be called a virgin mindset.

For that is what Mary shows us in our Gospel today. And that is what I love about Mary. When the angel showed up with the incredible message, Mary didn't tell the angel what it said or did wrong, she didn't try and take over the conversation, she did a beautiful thing: she listened, she accepted God's invitation to join God in something new, to enter virgin territory with God, and she let God be God. And despite not knowing all the details, despite not having a plan she could follow to guarantee success, despite not being given a large financial grant from God to make sure she could raise that baby in comfort, Mary let God into her life, and God began to grow in her, not just physically as a baby, but in other ways too. Another word for being with someone is to be in relationship with them, and so God being with Mary and God being with us is just another way to say being in relationship.

I love that Mary let God be God, she didn't make Christmas happen, God did. Mary let Jesus come into the world through her, that's how she became God's house. And today the good news is that while Mary was God's house in an extraordinary way, we are all given the same opportunity to join God in whatever God is up to, to enter virgin territory with God, to house God in our hearts, in our souls, in our minds, and with all our strength. We can let God be God, which means, in part, as we face an incredibly busy day, to be at peace and know that Christmas will happen whether or not we put up the bows perfectly, or hang the wreaths straight. Christmas will come no matter how many people attend the services, and Christmas will come even if sour notes are sung.

Jesus will come, not because of what we do, but because God wants to make God's house in us, with us, and that is why we celebrate with bows and wreaths and music and candles; those are the outward signs of the celebration that is how we welcome God home.