

When I was growing up, every June my school would put on an end of the year program. And the sixth grade, as the oldest kids, always played a special part in the program. My sixth-grade year we had a theme of Celebrating American History. For instance, to celebrate Hawaii's entering the Union as the 50th state, some of the sixth-grade girls did a hula dance – in appropriate native dress! – that was thought a bit risqué. They had to practice with the music teacher behind closed-doors. My classmate Peter Bernardo was chosen to impersonate Abraham Lincoln – stove-pipe hat, beard, and all --and recite the Gettysburg Address from memory. Peter was a small, Filipino boy, so the casting was literally a bit of a stretch, but he was smart, and the teacher must have thought he could best pull it off. But following the Gettysburg Address came my part, such as it was. There was a rousing patriotic song during which I, and a number of other students, walked out on stage carrying large cardboard cut-outs of states or groups of states, and formed ourselves into the current configuration of the United States of America.

My Grandmother was in town for the program and afterwards said it was very nice – but that she had hoped that I would have a bigger part. I knew what she meant. My part was pretty lame. Not only did I not have any lines, but the big cardboard cut-out I was carrying (I believe of the Southwestern States – or maybe just Texas) covered my whole upper body and face. Nobody could really tell it was even me! But that was just how I liked it.

Some of you remember my story of the Arbor Day Play disaster, in which I had the starring role as a forester – but had frozen up on stage when the curtain lifted. I forgot every line. The play just died: ended right there. Well, that had occurred just a month or two earlier, so I understand why I didn't get a real part. I certainly didn't want one. I was quite content to avoid the spotlight and all public speaking from that point on. All of which makes it interesting that I became a Priest, who speaks in front of hundreds of people several times a week.

“The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin . . . and the virgin’s name was Mary.” When we hear this introduction to the account of the Annunciation we need to remember what it would have sounded like to first century Jews.

Galilee was on the periphery of the Jewish world. And Nazareth was an insignificant town in that insignificant region. It wasn’t even mentioned in the whole Old Testament. But from that town, and that insignificant girl, would come the Messiah. In her seeming insignificance and her readiness, nonetheless, to let God act in and through her, Mary is a role model for Advent preparation for Discipleship.

When have you felt unprepared for something that you, nevertheless, felt God was asking you to do? Maybe you feel that way about something right now in your life. I think here about my own call to the priesthood. After my poor beginnings at public speaking and acting there were other experiences in the public eye over the years that were a mixed bag. So, when I thought about applying for the

seminary the idea of getting up in front of a church and giving a homily wasn't exactly attractive. I still liked the idea of walking around with a big cardboard Texas covering my face.

But, despite that, I still felt that God had called me to become His priest. So, honestly, I tried to put it out of my mind when I started studying to be a priest. Archbishop Murphy had told me, "Don't worry about that. The time will come when you will start practicing preaching and then you'll see what God's wants from you – and what He'll provide for you. If God wants you to be a priest He will give you the necessary equipment, if not, well, that will be a sign you aren't called to that vocation. But either way you don't have to worry. Your only question is will you say "Yes' to today's call to try it out"

That's what I would also say to each of you who are wondering, "Is God really calling me to do THAT (whatever *that* is)? But I would also add – God does call the seemingly insignificant to do things they thought they couldn't do. And what makes us great is not our gifts, but

what we allow God to do in, and through, our lives. Mary would be the first to admit that there was nothing special about her except what God had done for her. I think about my own preaching. God's call didn't mean I became a different person. When I gave my first homily my knees were literally knocking. I'm glad I was wearing an alb to cover them up. But I could do it. I can now see my past failures when young as a blessing in that I now know from them that anything good that comes through a homily I give is from God.

But as much as God works in our lives, He always respects us so much that He asks our permission first, whether we will allow Him to use us for His plan or not. That is what sets apart Disciples. It's not that they have no weaknesses, but they're the people who, despite those weaknesses, say "yes" and allow God to work through their lives.

So, what about your lives? It may not be something as big as a vocation. But what are you wrestling with, wondering if God is really calling you to do that thing that seems too difficult to you, where you

have failed before, perhaps? Mary said, “Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.” He’s asking us for that same permission to act in our lives with His grace.