

Homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 2017  
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In his book about the infancy of Jesus, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI mentions one powerful detail in the gospel we just heard—and it's something that I have to agree is striking. It is Mary's aloneness.

Benedict wrote: "*I consider it important to focus on the final sentence of Luke's Annunciation narrative: 'And the angel departed from her.' The great hour of Mary's encounter with God's messenger—in which her whole life is changed—comes to an end, and she remains there alone, with a task that truly surpasses all human capacity.*

It's a haunting image: a girl with the burden of history on her slender shoulders, preparing to change the world. How frightened she must have felt. How frightened and utterly *alone*.

It is compelling to think of this in the context of today's solemnity, when we celebrate Mary being conceived without sin in her mother's womb.

This singular woman, alone at the moment of the angel's visit, is also alone in history. There is no one else like her. 1800 years after her earthly life ended, when she appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes, she didn't say, "I am an Immaculate Conception." She said: "I am *the* Immaculate Conception." There is no other. And, like no other, she devoted herself to God. Her life became a prayer.

In the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist notes twice how Mary absorbed what she lived, and how she responded to it. He writes simply that Mary "**kept all these things in her heart.**" There's no account of her sharing her feelings or fears with others, or writing down her life story. She didn't go on Oprah or Good Morning America. No. Her life, instead, became an ongoing conversation with her Creator, a dialogue with the Divine.

And we realize, with a blinding clarity, that Mary, a woman alone, was never really alone after all. The angel's words to her from today's gospel say it all: "**Hail, Mary. The Lord is with you.**" *The Lord is with you.* How often those words must have given her strength and hope. And so they should for us, too.

On this day when we remember how she came into being, and the *uniqueness* of her being – how she was and remains THE Immaculate Conception – we remember, too, that she is “our light, our sweetness and our hope.”

**Mary is a figure for all time, and for our time.** She has been where we have been. She walks with us.

Mary is the woman facing an unexpected pregnancy.

She is the teenager realizing that all her plans and dreams have suddenly been changed.

Mary is the refugee seeking sanctuary.

She’s the anxious mother searching for a missing child.

She’s the widow watching her son face a violent and unjust execution.

At any moment, during her life, Mary might have felt a sense of her own isolation—that she was utterly alone in a harsh and unforgiving world.

But how many times did she find strength with the memory of these words: “**The Lord is with you.**” And how many times did she hear again and again, in the face of overwhelming impossibility: “**Nothing is impossible with God.**”

**And that, I think, is one of her great gifts to us**—to encourage us to trust, to inspire us to hope, to offer us the faith-filled reassurance that our lives are not lived in isolation.

To all who might feel alone or lonely, to all who might feel helpless or hopeless, to those who might be worried or frightened about the future...Mary is there. The reassuring words to her — “**Do not be afraid**” — are now her words to us. This day, we remember Mary. And we ask her to remember us. Our faith assures us that she will.

Despite how things seemed, Mary was never entirely alone. And neither are we.