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"You have found favor with God" (Luke 1:29).

*Is 7:10-14; Luke 1:26-38*

In the countdown to Christmas, we come at last to a story so compelling it is found in many world cultures and religions: A poor couple is given a mysterious child who holds the destiny of the world, just when it is at its nadir. Just when cowardice has compromised and selfish fear has ruined all human hope, a child is given, a fresh start, new hope, something wonderful.

This was the sign God offered King Ahaz in today's reading from Isaiah. In the midst of terror and despair, "a child is given, and he shall be called *Emmanuel*, "God-with-us." There will be a future because God is with us.

Luke brings Christian faith to this promise in the story of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary of Nazareth. She will complete the genealogy reaching back to the creation of Adam by consenting to conceive and give birth to Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate, the Son of God.

The Incarnation is the linchpin of our faith. If God is not among us, if Christ is not revealed as our brother and the pioneer of our salvation, we are souls adrift in time

and space, lighting bonfires against the winter sky. But if *Emmanuel* is real and true, we are not alone, but destined for eternal life in the community of God.

As we approach Christmas, our membership in that divine community helps us to understand the urgency Pope Francis has brought to the plight of refugees and migrants stranded throughout the world, displaced by wars, climate change and economic disruption. It is not hard to hear the pope's indignation and grief in his frequent appeals for nations with abundant resources to welcome their fellow human beings in crisis.

The angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God." By her consent to receive Jesus, she opened all of humanity to a new future with a divine destiny. All the themes and values expressed by the Christmas story plead with us to say "yes" as Mary did. It is not only the lives of others that hang in the balance, but our future as well.

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