

**Fifth Anniversary “Covenant” Celebration
Annunciation Parish – Taunton, MA.
Friday March 24, 2006**

Every four years the world is entertained with the winter Olympic games. This year the games were held in Torino, Italy. One of the most memorable moments of this year’s games was not held at a sports venue. It did not include a press conference and there were no pyrotechnic displays. It was a quiet moment involving a humble, but inspiring athlete named Joey Cheek.

Born and raised in Greensboro, NC, he found a hero in Norwegian speed skater Johann Olaf Koss who won three gold medals in the 1994 winter games in Lillehammer and donated the money to an organization called Olympic Aid. It was a humanitarian organization that helped war victims in the 1984 Winter Olympic city of Sarajevo. It has since been renamed *Right to Play* and Johann Koss serves as president and CEO. Joey Cheek donated the \$40,000.00 value of his gold and silver medals he won in Torino to help youth programs for Sudanese children at refugee camps in neighboring Chad. UNICEF’s website says 1.4 million Sudanese children, including 500,000 age 5 or younger, have been displaced from the Darfur region by militia groups that have destroyed villages and engaged in genocide. In Joey Cheek we see an Olympic athlete with two small medals and one enormous heart of gold.

After reading about this event and watching him being interviewed on TV I saw something in him quite different from other U.S. Olympic athletes. It dawned on me that the other athletes went to Torino thinking very small. Joey Cheek went to Torino thinking very big. While other athletes only thought of winning medals, Joey Cheek thought of becoming a philanthropist. His goal was to win enough money to give it away. In that respect he set a new gold standard for everyone.

Now let’s bring this story into conversation with the scripture stories for this Feast of The Annunciation of the Lord and reflect on how they challenge us to think big.

The reading from the prophet Isaiah is part of the Book of Emmanuel. It addresses a national crisis for the nation Judah under King Ahaz. A coalition between Israel and Assyria planned to depose Ahaz and replace him with an Aramean prince. The prophet Isaiah speaks out and expresses a basic conviction that there is no hope for the people apart from complete reliance on Yahweh. Ahaz rejects the offer of a sign, usually some event assuring humanity of divine intervention. His refusal is motivated by his unwillingness to follow the prophet’s advice. His stubbornness limits him

to only think small when it comes to rescuing his people from an invasion. Yahweh, tired and wearied of such arrogance, thinks big as Isaiah is inspired to speak the oracle about the virgin birth. An ideal king from the line of David would come from God and rescue humanity by ushering in the time of fulfillment.

Whereas the reading from Isaiah focuses on a ruler whose heart was small by stubbornness, the gospel story focuses on a virgin girl whose heart was small by fear. Whereas King Ahaz rejected Isaiah's vision of a divine intervention, Mary of Nazareth had no choice but to experience it.

In both stories divine intervention is at God's initiative. In the Old Testament story God did not wait for King Ahaz to swallow his pride. Rather, God inspired Isaiah to speak the prophecy because the vision of the Virgin birth in salvation history was bigger than the smallness of Ahaz' ego. Similarly, in the New Testament story, God did not wait for Mary of Nazareth to ask to become the God-bearer. The angel Gabriel was sent to share the news of her vocation to become the mother of God's son with the quickness of a Yahoo search engine. Whereas Isaiah encountered pride in Ahaz, Gabriel encountered fear in Mary. It would have to be removed because it was in the way. Like a roadblock that obstructs the flow of traffic, fear in Mary obstructed the flow of grace that frees a fearful heart and converts it into a trusting heart.

Like a skillful spiritual director, the angel invites Mary to think big. To do that Gabriel does two things. First, he helps her change language. The word fear is replaced with favor. It is much more affirming. She is asked to look away from fear by noticing that God likes her and wants her to notice what is special about her. Gabriel is deleting the old program of fear and writing a new program of trust on her heart.

Second, once she is free of the fear that nearly kills God's dream, Gabriel readjusts her mind. She is invited to think beyond the limited mindset of child-bearing through sexual intercourse with Joseph and imagine conceiving and bearing a child by being impregnated through the Holy Spirit. To think of God as the father of this child is to think big. Since this child will be more than just a human son to Mary and Joseph, she needed a mind and heart big enough to see the bigger picture of God's plan for this new chapter in salvation history.

Her line, *"let it be done to me as you say,"* indicates a heart free to trust, a mind open to cooperating with God in a new adventure and a womb empty of confusion and ready to be filled with the grace of a divine fetus.

This is Annunciation. This is how God broke into human history in a radical way and invited a humble teenage Jewish girl to think big and be an

active participant in a good news story. A modern day version of this annunciation story is how God invited a humble Olympic athlete like Joey Cheek to think big and inspire others to become good news. Now I am going to invite you to put into practice your namesake as Parish of the Annunciation and let God use you to think big. Next Wednesday is the seventh month anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

One of the parishes badly affected by the fallout of the storm was Annunciation Parish in the Diocese of Biloxi, MS. Located in the town of Kiln, Mississippi, on the northern tip of St. Louis Bay, the parish was hit hard by the storm surge from the Gulf into the Bay. I spoke with the pastor two weeks ago. Their parish of 500 families continues to see a return of parishioners. But, they need books, bibles and classroom materials for their catechetical programs.

I invite Annunciation Parish in Taunton, MA, to think big about how you can become a good news story to Annunciation Parish in Kiln, MS. One way to do this is through a new video ministry. On the video should be the pastor here speaking to the pastor there, the parish council here speaking to the parish council there, pastoral staff here speaking to the pastoral staff there, members of the youth group here speaking with the youth group there, kids in catechetical programs here speaking with the same there. Send the video to them or burn it into a CD, and let them return it with their faces and voices on it. Let them show you what stage of recovery they are in and let them tell you what their greatest needs are. Then, respond as people whose Catholic identity is colored and defined by Annunciation Parish, a people committed to sharing good news with people who need it. Perhaps this new ministry would include some of you visiting Annunciation Parish in Kiln. Perhaps it would include some teenagers here inviting some of the youth there to visit you this summer. There can be no better news for youth who lived through a nightmare like this, and who are now into countdown to the next hurricane season, than to be invited to take a break from the anxiety and stress of such a shadow hovering over them and come north for a week's vacation. I call this a reversal of seasons. During the cold winter months you take a spring break and head south to warmer weather. For those in the hurricane zones, they now need a summer break and heard north for calmer weather.

The challenge to put your namesake into action this way is appropriate for two reasons. First, it coincides with your fifth covenant anniversary celebrating two parishes becoming Annunciation Parish. Second, it fits in with the season of March madness. The idea of the NCAA basketball countdown from 64 teams to the final four to the final two is a form of madness that millions of people get caught up in.

This madness is unleashed every March. The euphoria of the winter Olympics is unleashed every four years. It is hard to avoid it. In fact, it is

good for the soul to be caught up in it. For both of these sports provide an energy that converts hearts to rekindle drooping spirits like those still trying to rebuild their lives in Louisiana and the Gulf coast. So, be daring Catholics with the heart of Mary whose "YES" to God enabled her to think big. And be Olympic Catholics with the soul of Joey Cheek whose DNA for compassion cannot be fabricated on a T-shirt. And practice March madness as faith people who celebrate Lent. Discover new and creative ways to announce good news to your brothers and sisters in Kiln, MS. This is thinking big. This is adapting the Annunciation story of Mary of Nazareth and Joey Cheek of N.C. by letting others see how God, who is madly in love with you, practice that divine madness by your love for others. Amen.