

## **Sermon: Miracles and Mary**

12/20/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the weeks and months following the birth of our oldest son, Thane, Mallory and I questioned whether we would have another child. You see, Thane was born five-and-a-half weeks early, old enough to breathe on his own, but not yet ready to drink from a bottle. For over a week, we stayed with him at the hospital, first in the NICU and later in the pediatrics wing. I will never forget those long, hard days or the slow, careful car ride home, with a child so small that he seemed to disappear into his car seat. The day that Thane was born, Mallory and I learned that if we had other children they would likely be born just as early. So when we learned that she was pregnant with Tyler, we were overjoyed. We were also afraid; afraid both because of the uncertainty that lie ahead and because we had a fairly good sense of what might be coming. I wonder if that's how Mary felt in the midst of today's Gospel lessons.

The day that the Angel Gabriel appeared, Mary was no more than a teenager, and possibly as young as fourteen years old. We Christians like to believe that she grew up in a pious household, given her response to Gabriel and the fact that two of her relatives—Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist's parents—descended from priestly families. But the truth is that we honestly don't know. What we do know is that she was a young woman with little to no status or formal education who had been engaged and betrothed to a man named Joseph. At some point in the next year, they would be married during a weeklong celebration and their marriage would be consummated. Until then, she would remain a virgin while living her father's household, waiting for the day when Joseph would come and call upon her.

Although Mary might not have known the exact day when Joseph would arrive, she did have a fairly good sense of where her life was taking her. She knew that someday soon she would get married, have children, and run a household. So when the angel Gabriel appeared, she had good reason to be afraid. After all, as noted by Jewish theologian Eli Wiesel, if an angel ever appears to you saying, “Don’t be afraid,” you’d better watch out. Throughout Scripture, angels appear when something big is about to happen, something that will change a person’s life forever. “Greetings favored one,” Gabriel begins, “The Lord is with you.” “Surely such a greeting can only mean one thing,” we can hear Mary think to herself, “that soon my life will never be the same. But how,” she ponders, “and why?”

“No,” Gabriel continues, “there’s no need to be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and his kingdom will have no end.” Now, much like today, there were real-life consequences to becoming pregnant out of wedlock. If what Gabriel was saying was true, then Mary would almost certainly become an immediate outcast, her good standing and social reputation would be destroyed, and her upcoming marriage would be called off, leaving her a poor, destitute, unwed teenage mother. As Mary stood there, I imagine all of these thoughts and more were swirling around in her mind. But there was one thing above all that she just couldn’t shake: a question. “How can I become pregnant and have a child? How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

It was a good question. A question that I’m guessing we all would have asked. A question that, based on Gabriel’s response, he was probably expecting as well. “Soon,” Gabriel tells her, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. This is how you will become pregnant, pregnant with the Son of God.” Now, Mary’s response to

Gabriel is well-known and frequently cited as evidence of her unfailing faith and courage. She is described as confidently proclaiming, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” But what if, I began to wonder this past week, she was experiencing many of those same emotions that I did just a few years ago as I waited on the birth of my youngest son, Tyler? What if she was not just expressing faith, and hope, and joy when she spoke those words, but also anxiety and fear over the weeks and months that lay ahead? If so, then Gabriel pointing towards Elizabeth suddenly makes a lot more sense.

There are a few times in my life when it has felt like God has spoken directly to me. These moments, like when I could feel God’s presence in everything around me, I will never be able to forget or deny. Because of them, I’m confident that God is present and at work in my life and in the world. And yet, with each passing day, they become more and more a memory. Now, I’m not trying to suggest that any of these moments can compare to what Mary experienced while speaking with Gabriel that day. I’ve never spoken with an angel, let alone the angel Gabriel. But I can understand how, in the months and years that followed, the immediacy of that experience might begin to fade. Just think about it, it would be forty long weeks until Jesus was born. Forty weeks of waiting and worrying, of wondering what would become of her life and of the child whom God had given her. Nearly forty weeks ago exactly, the governors of Washington and Oregon issued their first stay-at-home orders, we closed down our church building, and we began meeting online for worship and fellowship. Forty weeks sure can feel like a long time, especially when you’re in the midst of it.

I don’t know what struggles Mary faced after Gabriel left. As I said before, we really don’t know that much about her. Perhaps, she worried each and every day of her pregnancy that she was not good enough to raise the Son of God, or maybe she suffered from postpartum

depression, only made worse upon hearing that King Herod wanted to kill her and her family. She had a lot of reasons to be afraid. My guess is that's why the presence of Elizabeth was so important; for while Mary never met the angel Gabriel again, she had in Elizabeth a constant reminder that nothing is impossible with God. After all, only a miracle could explain how Elizabeth was pregnant. Only a miracle could explain John the Baptist, the child who leapt in Elizabeth's womb in the midst of their pregnancies, before going on to prepare the way of the Lord; to prepare the way for her son, the Son of God.

And so Mary continued on, and at some point along the way, she sang a song of praise that has captured our imagination for generations. Her Magnificat, a song in which she proclaims that her soul magnifies the Lord and that her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Her song is a testament not just to the miracle that God had given her, but to the amazing things that her son would one day do. Her son, Jesus Christ, had been sent to lift up the humble, to fill the hungry, to show mercy to those who fear God, and to stay true to the promises that God has made. Promises that God made to Mary, to the Israelites, and to us gathered here today.

This Advent season, like Mary, we have spent weeks looking forward to the birth of our Savior, and we have done so filled with a range of emotions. There are times when we have praised God for all that God is doing in our lives and the world around us; when we have sung our own Magnificats. There are also times when we have felt afraid. Afraid of what the future may hold for us, for our family and friends, and for this faith community. The last forty weeks have been trying for each of us. Our lives have quite literally changed in ways that we are only beginning to understand and accept, and we don't have an experience like Mary did with the angel Gabriel to give us strength and courage. What we do have is moments and people like Elizabeth, those everyday miracles that remind us that nothing is impossible with God.

Mallory and I had every reason to expect that Tyler would be born premature. So months before his due date, we packed our bags, made arrangements for Thane, and prepared ourselves for more time in the NICU. Then we waited, and waited, and waited. We waited all the way until one day before his due date. That he was not born earlier was a miracle, an everyday miracle that I will always remember and for which I will always give thanks. What everyday miracles has God done in your life? May they also give you the strength to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.