

The Holy Family: Mary

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent. This morning we are going to light the rose or pink colored candle. If you've wondered why one candle was a different color than the other three, it wasn't because the store was out of purple. The purple candles represent penitence since Advent is a time of repentance as we prepare our hearts for his coming. The ancient church fasted during Advent as a means of spiritual preparation for the coming of the Messiah, but on the third Sunday they broke the fast as a sign of anticipating the great joy that comes with the birth of the Lord. It is a reminder to all of us that the message of Christmas is good news of great joy! Hear the good news delivered by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 35:

Reader: Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

Congregation: Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Reader: And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.

Congregation: No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

And from Isaiah 40

Reader: You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;

Congregation: Say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.

Reader: He tends his flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Congregation: Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his

understanding no one can fathom.

Reader: He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall;

Congregation: But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Heavenly Father, as we light the Advent candle this morning we are reminded of your good news, that you are with us. The prophet told us to go to the high mountain and announce the good news, "Here is your God!" We announce today the good news of the coming of Immanuel, God with us. God has come in Christ to save us, to comfort us, to give life and hope to us. How glad and thankful we are for such good news. We are reminded today, that even though we may grow tired and weary, you don't. You have an endless supply of strength and power and mercy, and if we wait upon you, if we trust in and rely upon you, you will renew our strength. Grant that by your mercy we will run and not grow weary, we will walk and not faint. Enable us to faithfully carry your good news to all who will listen, to announce to all there is cause for rejoicing and great joy: a Savior is born and he is Christ the Lord. Amen.

We continue our Advent series today looking at the Holy Family. Last week we talked about Joseph and this morning we are going to focus on Mary, the mother of our Lord.

I wonder what Mary was like? Imagine having such an incredible responsibility as to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God. What was their relationship like? She nursed him, held him, rocked him when he cried. She taught him and protected him. But did they play games together? Did she have cookies ready when he got home from school? Did she comfort him when other kids made fun of him? Did her face light up like my Mom's did when her son Jesus came home? I wonder what Mary was like.

I suppose she was like most young girls, full of hopes and dreams. We don't believe Mary was born without sin (that is the belief of the immaculate conception), but we do know she was a godly young woman and highly favored by God. Like all young Jewish girls she hoped her child would grow up to be the Messiah, the one chosen to be the deliverer of Israel. And like all the other girls, she had no idea what that would really mean nor what kind of sacrifice that would actually demand.

An apocryphal work (the *Protevangelium of James*) says her mother Anne and father

Joachim were unable to have children and were advanced in years. The story says they promised the Lord if they had a child they would give her to the Lord. After she was born, Mary's parents presented her to the priests and she served the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem. (It was from this same source we got the idea that Joseph was an older widower with children of his own.)

I don't know if any of that is true or accurate, but what I do know is that she must have been an extraordinary young lady. The Scripture refers to her as a virgin, meaning a young maiden that has not married or had sexual relations. Consider the descriptions from Luke 1. The bible says Mary was highly favored, that the Lord was with her, she had found favor with God, and she was blessed above all other women. Elizabeth her relative said, "why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

As we understand it, God was choosing a mother for his Son so he would have chosen well, right? A virgin who was godly, humble. In fact, if we read her song in Luke 1:46, the *Magnificat*, we can identify more attributes. She is thankful (v46), she is humbly aware that it is God's doings and not something she earned (v48-49), she is God fearing (v50), she is hungry for God and all he offers (v53), and she is a true daughter of Israel (v55).

The more I have read and reflected on this young lady, the more amazed I am, the more inspired I am by her life, her courage and her commitment to God. She is not to be worshiped, but she is certainly to be honored. Like no other in the history of the world, she was favored by God to bear God in flesh in her womb. What an extraordinary thought.

It was perhaps a morning like any other. Tradition says Mary, now betrothed to Joseph, was drawing water at a well in Nazareth, the site now marked by The Church of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her with this curious greeting. **"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."** **Luke 1:28** That has to be good news, doesn't it? You who are richly blessed, graced by the Lord.

Let's read **Luke 1:26-38**. Some scholars believe Mary to have been a young teenager, maybe 14-17. Imagine the responsibility that is suddenly thrust upon her. She is to marry Joseph, whom as we said some believe was an older man, a widower with children. Whether or not she is about to become a step-mother to Joseph's children, if in fact that is the case, she is about to become pregnant before marriage. Pregnant but single. Some of you may understand and can relate to the emotions of joy mixed with fear. Pregnant and unmarried. You may understand how she must have felt, knowing that she faced speculation and perhaps ridicule and

scorn from family and community. What would her parents think? This couple that had given her to God? Would they think she had fallen from her walk of holiness and devotion to the Lord? How would the townspeople treat her? How would they react to a scandal?

And what about Joseph? How could she explain this pregnancy? What could she do? What would Joseph do? Matthew's gospel tells us how Joseph reacted. We talked about it last Sunday, with Joseph intending to end the engagement by means of a quiet divorce until the Lord spoke to him and explained what was happening.

I just can't get over what must have been going through her heart and mind. How overwhelming it all must have seemed to her. I mean, it's overwhelming to me just reading about it. **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Luke 1:35**

We can't imagine what she felt hearing that. How could she begin to comprehend, that? And the angel had said her child was to be named Jesus which means Savior. **"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Luke 1:32-33**

That sounds like he will be the Messiah and King, but that also sounds like trouble. What will that mean for Mary and for her son? It was a dangerous time for Jewish nationalists. Mary knew that not too many miles from her home in Nazareth the Romans had put down a Jewish insurrection and crucified 2,000 Jews and then burned the cities of Sepphoris and Emmaus to the ground. In fact, Joseph probably helped rebuild Sepphoris since it was close to Nazareth. All this talk of a Messiah and Savior sounds wonderful but dangerous as well.

The angel Gabriel gets his answer from Mary then leaves abruptly. It just says, **"Then the angel left her."** I would have had a few more questions. "I need some further details. I need to know the what if's. What if Joseph doesn't believe me? Can I back out? What if my parents don't believe me? Will you be there to tell them? Is this going to disrupt my whole life? Is this going to hurt?" Here is what we learn from Mary's experience:

Where God's kingdom and plans break in upon this earthly kingdom and our plans, there is usually pain involved. God called Mary to a place of surrender and commitment, to a place of sacrifice and obedience, and there would be pain involved. There would be the rumors and speculation of neighbors and the issue with Joseph. There would be a tearing of her physical

flesh as she gave birth to her Son, God's son, and there would be a sword that would pierce her soul as well, according to Simeon in Luke 2. Obedience is seldom pain free.

Another thing we learn from Mary's experience: **Information seems to come on a "need to know" basis and we won't have all the answers up front.** It was a walk of faith for Mary. She didn't know how all of this would turn out. She couldn't have foreseen the cross and all the pain in her heart, or the glorious resurrection. God didn't give her the answers up front and he seldom gives them to us either. Instead, we walk by faith and not by sight, trusting in the God who is faithful and who does the impossible. He will give us the answers and information when we need them. In the meantime, trust and obey and keep walking by faith!

God is calling us to a place of surrender and commitment. Like Mary, it will be a place of sacrifice and obedience, and there will be pain involved and we likely won't have all the answers or information up front. There will be a tearing in our flesh as we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. It is no small thing to surrender your everything to God and his will for your life.

Mary could view this whole thing as either more trouble than she has ever known or as a far greater blessing than she has ever known. It will be determined by her response. And the same can be said for us. God calls us this morning, not in as dramatic a fashion as Mary, but we are being called to surrender to him, to his will, his plans and purpose for our lives. All of us are being called to a life of obedience to Christ. And we are given a choice, just like Mary.

Mary could have said, "Listen, thanks for offering, but no. Really, I'm just not the person for this. I'm not the mothering type. I can't do this. Joseph will be upset, Mom and Dad will be embarrassed. It'll cost me too much. It's too much of an interruption to my plans. You'll have to find someone else."

Mary could have chosen to avoid the pain. No risk, no trouble with Joseph, no birth pains in a stable, no running from Herod and hiding in Egypt. She could have said no, stayed in Nazareth, married Joseph, had a few kids and lived happily ever after.

But oh, what Mary would have missed! What playing it safe would have cost Mary in the Kingdom of God. The angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God."

Mary, you could skip the pain and the sacrifice, but you'll miss the best, the greatest. You'll miss knowing God in a way that no one has ever known him or will ever know him. You

would miss the pain of birthing a child in a stable, but you would also miss the glory of holding the Son of God in your arms, cradling the One who cradled the stars as he flung them into space.

Yes, a call to obedience and surrender in your life may be a call to pain as the Spirit confronts the sinful, willful flesh, but it is worth the sacrifice and pain. Obedience is always a call to come up higher. It's a call to experience the grace and glory of God like you've never experienced it before. It's a call to be more than you could ever be. A call to obedience is a call to accomplish more than you could ever accomplish on your own and by yourself. It is a call to experience God's very best. It is a call to align yourself with his cause, his will, his way, his purpose. It is a call to walk in intimacy with the One who is faithful. It's a call to some pain and sacrifice, dying to yourself, but it is also a call to an abundant, extraordinary life. The call is being made to Mary and to all of us. How will we answer?

Mary asks only one question. **“How will this be since I am a virgin?” Luke 1:34** Just one question. I would have had so many more questions, but it seems so simple for Mary. “Just tell me this – how will this be?” And the answer itself was quite simple. Mary, **“Nothing is impossible with God.” Luke 1:37** That's all she needed to hear.

Remember where Mary was in the context of Israel's history. There had been no prophet, no word from God. 400 years of silence and then an angel announces that God is with this teen-aged girl in Galilee and tells her nothing is impossible with God. I can imagine Mary thinking, “That's what the priests told me and what my mother and father told me. They recounted the stories of the miracles of the patriarchs and the prophets, but there has been no prophet for so long. There has been no good news. Our land is occupied by the Romans. Jews are being executed at the whim of the Emperor and the King. We wondered if God had forgotten his promise to Abraham and his descendants. Things look impossible. Maybe the days of miracles are past.” But the angel said nothing was impossible with God and that's all Mary needed to know. “If God can do the impossible, then he can make this happen as well and I can deliver this child. If nothing is impossible with God then I can say yes to all God has for me!”

And with that knowledge in her heart and mind, we hear Mary say these powerful words of surrender and commitment, **“I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Luke 1:38** I like the King James Version: **“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word.”** (KJV)

“I surrender Lord. I am your servant and I'll do what pleases and honors you. There may

be trouble or pain but Lord, I belong to you. Do with me and my life as you see fit.”

That is complete surrender. There may be a battle that comes with surrender, but oh what glory and joy comes with it as well. Listen again as Mary sings, **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.” Luke 1:46-49**

And look at verse 45. It’s Elizabeth’s affirmation of Mary and it sums up so much concerning Mary’s faith. **“Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.” Luke 1:45**

I believe this is the key to Mary’s life: Her willingness to believe what the Lord said would be accomplished and her willingness to surrender to whatever God desired for her life.

Surrender and believe. Trust and obey. It leads to the miraculous. It leads to salvation and redemption. It leads to joy and holiness. Mary believed what God told her through the angel Gabriel would be accomplished.

May I challenge you today to submit your life to Christ the way his mother submitted her life to God. Trust him, even when what he is calling you to do looks impossible. Obey him even when it seems risky to do so. Surrender to him even when the cost seems great, for his call to you, to walk in obedience and surrender, to trust his promises and rely upon his faithfulness, that call leads to victory for you and for others. Mary’s obedience led to salvation and redemption for us all. Your obedience will make the difference in your life and the life of those around you.

Mary was unique, blessed, highly favored, chosen. But so are you. You’ve been blessed by God’s mercy and grace. You’ve been favored by God. He chose Mary to bear his Son and give birth to the Redeemer, but he chose you to receive life from the Son, to be born again into the kingdom of God. He chose you and called you his daughter, his son, his beloved. He has a plan and purpose for your life if you will surrender to him.

How do you respond to his call? Like Mary did so long ago. “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Lord, whatever you want, here I am! Will you surrender to him today? Will you believe that what he has promised, what he has said to you, he will do? Will you commit your life and your future to him today? It will make all the difference in the world.