

In January of 1985, I began seminary. In April, my mother passed away. At only 22, I was on my own. A few months later, my 16 year old sister asked if she could come live with me. After my mother's death, she had been taken in by a family from the church we were attending, but they were toxic people. So before I turned 23, I became a single parent. Since the seminary in Philadelphia was tax exempt, no school age children could reside in school housing, so I had to move off campus.

Within a few months, I was living in an apartment in West Chester, serving part time as the youth director of a church, working two other part time jobs, and exhausted. I soon began to wonder where God was in all this, and was fearful of how it would all turn out. For I had just begun seminary. And as I tried to pay all my bills, it began to look like I was going to have to drop out of school and get a full time job.

I tell you all that to say that when I read the story of Mary in the first chapter of Luke, I relate to how she must have felt when the angel said "*you will be with child and give birth to a son.*" For while it is easy to hear Mary's question "*how will this be . . . since I am a virgin?*" as a biological one, I think she was asking a larger question. After all, Mary surely understood how babies come into the world. She also knew that in her culture, it was not acceptable for her to be "*with child.*" This meant more than just having people disapprove, however. It also meant the real possibility of being harshly punished. For the Law said that a woman who becomes pregnant outside of marriage should be stoned to death. And Mary knew that this had been done in the past.

Add to that the fact that Luke tells us nothing of how Mary's parents reacted to her "good news," and the fact that he does tell us that soon after they must have reacted, Mary fled to the home of Elizabeth "*in the hill country of Judea,*" I can't help believe that Mary must have been frightened and confused. For Mary was living in Nazareth when the angel visited her. Elizabeth lived in Judea. That is a three day journey. Teenage girls did not venture out into the dangerous world of ancient Israel alone on a three day journey for no reason. Mary must have felt alone. And she must have been fearful of how it would all turn out. After all, Mary followed the Law and lived by God's ways. We know this because the angel said "*greetings, you who are highly favored!*" The angel would not have said that if she were not someone whose character God could trust to nurture the Messiah - not only physically, but also in the ways of faithful living.

What Mary did when she arrived at the home of Elizabeth "*in the hill country of Judea*" is therefore the basis of this year's Advent worship series. For Mary, feeling alone and fearful, broke out in a song of praise to God. And in that song, she echoed biblical ideas that the Church has long understood to be part of what God invites us to be doing in Advent to prepare OUR hearts for Christmas. As we gather together today on this first Sunday of Advent, we therefore look at the first of those biblical themes: "comfort," and how God continues to invite His children to find comfort in Him in the midst of the lonely and frightful experiences of life.

Mary's song is titled "the Magnificat." It comes from the first phrase of her song in Latin: "*my soul glorifies the Lord.*" Think about that phrase. Mary was a teenage girl. She faithfully followed the

Law and lived by God's ways. One day an angel appeared to her. He told her that contrary to biology, and in violation of the Law, God was going to make her pregnant. Her mind raced to her parents, and what they would think. Her thoughts went to the people of Nazareth, and how they might react. Then she remembered the religious authorities, and how they had treated other unmarried young girls who had been found to be "*with child.*" After pondering her predicament for awhile, she fled to the only person she thought might be able to help, Elizabeth. But Elizabeth lived three days away! Confused, and filled with terror, she nevertheless threw caution to the wind, and "*hurries*" out of Nazareth to "*the hill country of Judea.*"

Mary probably didn't know how Elizabeth would receive her. She probably didn't know if Elizabeth would believe her. But Elizabeth may have been the only hope she had to be delivered from her confusion and terror. The reason she may have thought that (and was willing to risk the danger of traveling alone on a journey through Israel) was the angel had told her "*Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age.*" So Mary may have thought that Elizabeth (who also just had God do a miraculous thing for her) might believe the craziness of what the angel had said. As a result, when her hope for a positive reception turned out to be true (with Elizabeth confirming the angel's words when she declared "*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!*") Mary burst out singing "*my soul glorifies the Lord.*"

The reason her soul could glorify the Lord was that He had given her comfort in her distress. We see this stated in the next phrase of Mary's song: "*he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*" The word "humble" is a reference to her social standing. For while Mary probably grew up knowing that she was of the lineage of David that ancestry meant nothing in terms of economic station. After all, her parents had betrothed her to a carpenter, which was not a high paying profession. That means her father was probably a common laborer as well.

Yet God had the angel not only say to this young woman of humble birth "*you will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,*" but also tell her that this son "*will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. [For] the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.*" As Mary pondered those words again after being graciously received by Elizabeth, their gravity may have finally hit her. The angel had said that HER son would reclaim the throne of David from Herod and the Romans. The angel had said that HER son was going to be the long awaited Messiah! The angels has said that HER son would be the one to free Israel from oppression! And the angels had said that HER son would be the one whose name would be on everyone's lips!

But it wouldn't just be her son's name on everyone's lips. Elizabeth had said hers would be as well. For "*blessed are you among women!*" she had said, and "*blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!*" So Mary burst out in song, having been comforted by Elizabeth, declaring in response "*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.*"

I saw how the story of Mary can bring comfort to hurting people in a humorous way a few weeks ago. I was asked to do a funeral. I met with the family, and we talked about their loved one and the funeral service. As we talked, it was obvious they didn't have a church, and didn't understand Christian theology. At the end of our time together, however, they asked if we could play "Ave Maria" at the funeral service.

"Ave Maria," was written by Franz Schubert in 1825. It was part of a story about a woman who prayed to Mary for help when her family was being besieged by King James. It became so popular that the Latin prayer to Mary used by the Roman Catholic Church eventually replaced Schubert's words, and it began to be used in religious settings. So here was a family with no church involvement, and no knowledge of Jesus, but in their distress somehow felt that Mary (and the comfort offered to her by God) might provide comfort to them in their time of distress.

As Protestants, we don't pray to Mary. But we can still find comfort in her story. For in her story, we hear about a young woman who lived by God's ways. Then something happened in her life, and she found herself confused and afraid. But because she lived by God's ways, she didn't let that fear and confusion overwhelm her, and instead followed the leading of God to visit a relative named Elizabeth. And in that visit found the comfort she needed to continue to say with confidence "*I am the Lord's servant . . . may it be to me as you have said.*"

As we gather together to worship God on this first Sunday of Advent, we are invited to join Mary in having faith that we are also "*highly favored,*" and that the Lord is also "*with us*" in times of fear and confusion. For the words of Gabriel to Mary are also God's words to us here this morning, as God promises to all who will trust in Him that "*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" For while God will not have us give birth to a Messiah, He does want to birth in us a Messianic kind of life.

We see this in the words of Isaiah. In Isaiah 11, the coming of the Messiah was prophesied: "*a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. [And] the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him - the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD . . . righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*" When He finally came, Jesus said such things were not meant to only apply to Him alone, but to all who follow Him.

This means that as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child anew, we are called to remember that we too are "*highly favored,*" and that the Lord is "*with us*" even in times of fear and confusion. It also means that we are called to follow the example of Mary's son in the ways He spoke about in his first sermon when he quoted the prophet Isaiah to say "*the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" This is because we sing Mary's song of comfort best, and benefit personally from it the most, when we join our Lord Jesus in preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and when we work to release the oppressed, and proclaim the Lord's favor.