

When our son Stephen was young, he was in Cub Scouts. At each level, I was his Den Leader. After a den meeting one night, he and his friends were running around in the fellowship hall of a church as the adults were cleaning up. The boys were told several times to stop running. Each time they were told to stop running, they were also told that we wanted them to stop running because we were concerned that someone was going to get hurt. Lo and behold, a few minutes later Stephen fell, hit his face on the floor, and broke off the bottom half of a front tooth.

Suppressing the anger that was urging me to yell at him for disobeying, and curbing the temper that was pushing me to tell him he got what he deserved, I comforted him - explaining that we would take him to the dentist the next morning to get it repaired. When he responded by wailing that the dentist couldn't fix a broken tooth, I not only continued to comfort him by telling him things would turn out alright, I also began to encourage him by explaining what crowns and implants were, and describing how those dental procedures could even fix a broken tooth.

In his gospel, Luke tells us that ages ago God did something similar. In the first chapter of his gospel, Luke recounts how God sent an angel to a teenage girl named Mary. He also tells us that "*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*" Luke says that Mary became even more troubled when the angel said "*you will be with child and give birth to a son.*" For as Mary explained to the angel, she was not married. So having a baby would have been a violation of the Law, and violating the Law in this way could mean 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 this had been done in the past.

Fortunately, God is perfect. And God (as Mary acknowledged in her song "The Magnificat") is so perfect we can say with full assurance "*holy is his name,*" even in times of discouragement. For God doesn't have to suppress His anger, or curb His temper, as they are always under control because of His great love for us. As a result, when we go astray, and do that which we shouldn't do, God still seeks to encourage us by inviting us to turn away from evil and back to Him. For while we are sinful creatures, and in our fallen state cannot help but go astray, God has promised that "*the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*" not only to Mary, but also to everyone willing to believe. And with the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can lean on the promise of the angel to Mary that "*nothing is impossible with God.*"

What Mary did in light of such promises 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 discouraged, broke out in a song of praise to God. And in that song of praise, she echoed biblical ideas that the Church has long understood to be part of what God invites us to do in Advent to prepare our hearts for Christmas. As we gather together to worship God on this second Sunday of Advent, we therefore look at the second of those biblical themes: "encouragement," and how God invites His children to find encouragement in what He offers to do FOR us, IN us, and THROUGH us - even in the midst of the discouraging 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 had 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, she fled to the only person she thought might be able to help, Elizabeth.

Mary may have thought she was the only chance she had to be delivered from discouragement, for the angel had told her "*Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age.*" This may have led Mary to think that Elizabeth (who 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 came true (with Elizabeth confirming the angel's words when she said "*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!*") Mary sang "*my soul glorifies the Lord.*"

The reason her soul could 'glorify the Lord' was that He had given her encouragement in the midst of her distress. We see this stated in the phrase of Mary's song we are looking at today: "*the Mighty One has done great things for me.*" The "great things" Mary was referring to were things in the present and things in the future. That is because instead of her child being one that would bring stigma and shame upon her, the angel had promised that her son would bring about a wonderful new world - for her and her people. For 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 would be the Messiah! And the angel had said that HER son would free her people from their discouragement! For this would be no ordinary child, the angel declared: instead the angel said that "*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*"

Encouraged that the things the angel said were about to happen were not going to result in a negative reality, but a positive one (for her and for the world!), Mary burst out in song: "*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.*" As we look into what the "great things" were that God had done to encourage Mary, there are three that instantly come to mind.

The first "great thing" God did to encourage Mary was to help her to realize that He KNOWS OUR PLIGHT. God knows we suffer. He understands our pain. And He sympathizes with our distress. For God is not high above the world, isolated from the suffering, pain, and distress of our lives. In fact, according to the writers of the Bible, God experienced those frailties Himself by taking on flesh in Jesus and dwelling among us. For instance, Mark tells us that Jesus "*was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan.*" This tells us that God understands how hard it is for us to do the right thing at times. John tells us that as Jesus got closer to the cross "*many of his disciples turned back*

*and no longer followed him.” This tells us that God understands what it feels like to be betrayed by those close to us. And Matthew says that as He stood in the garden, with the threat of the cross looming over him, Jesus said “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow.” This tells us that God understands how heavily things can weigh on us, and how easy it is for us to be discouraged when storm clouds roll on us in life.*

*And in case we need more convincing, the writer of the book of Hebrews invites us to “throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God . . . so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*

The second “great thing” God did to encourage Mary was to help her to realize that He HEARS OUR CRIES. God actively listens to us. For even though He knows our every thought, and even though He knows our fears and concerns better than we do, He still actively listens to what we have to say to Him, wanting to hear the needs, concerns, wishes, and desires we bring to Him in prayer. That is because God is all about relationship. And relationship involves two way involvement. So even though He is the Almighty Creator, God still humbly participates with us in a two way conversation, speaking to us to tell us the things we need to know to move beyond discouragement, and then listening to us in order to give us the encouragement we need to face the difficult issues of life in this fallen and sinful world.

We see this stated by the writers of the Bible again and again. The writer of Chronicles tells us that God has said “*if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*” Jeremiah tells us that God has said “*call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.*” And John wrote that “*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*” And in case we didn’t grasp just how much God wants to have us speaking with Him, Jesus even gave us a sample prayer of the kinds of things God wants us to be talking about with Him.

The final “great thing” God did to encourage Mary was to help her to realize that He HEALS OUR WOUNDS. God intentionally involves Himself in our lives to make things better, not just commiserate with us. This is because the encouragement He offers us is the knowledge that we can live in ways that are free from the pains of sin and the evil of this world. For sin and evil, and suffering and strife, were not part of the perfect world our perfect God originally created. Those things came into the world (and into human experience) because Adam and Eve chose to walk away from God and the perfect world He created. But in Mary’s son, God offers the potential for those realities to be reversed. This is why Isaiah said that “*He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.*” And it is why Peter wrote that “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. [For] by his wounds you have been healed.*”

We saw this in the incident with our son Stephen. We left the cub scout meeting that night, and went home, where Stephen spent the rest of the night moaning and groaning - not because the injury was particularly painful but because of the fact that he knew he had done something wrong, and that his injury was the direct result of his wrongdoing. Looking in the mirror every few minutes for hours on end that night, he therefore saw direct evidence of his sinfulness, and the pain and suffering our sinfulness can bring upon us.

But as I spoke with him, that night and the next day on the way to the dentist, he began to be less discouraged, finally accepting the encouraging message that his broken tooth could be repaired. When we arrived at the office, he was ushered into a dental chair. The dentist came in, and (knowing what had happened) asked “*so why are we here today?*” And Stephen, clinging to all the optimism he could muster, replied “*I broke my tooth, and need to get a crown.*”

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child anew this Advent season, we are called to remember that we - like Mary - are “*highly favored,*” and that the Lord is “*with us*” even in times of discouragement. It also means that we are called to allow God to help us trust in the fact that God knows our plight, that God hears our cries, and - most importantly - that God can heal our wounds - if we are willing to say with Mary “*I am the Lord's servant . . . may it be to me as you have said.*” For it is only when we turn to God as Mary did that we can sing Mary's song of encouragement, and invite others to sing it with us, saying with one voice “*the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name.*”