

Living Up to Mother's Dreams

Luke 1:26-38

At this point in my life, I'm fairly confident the story of my own birth was not very Christ-like. Granted, the two-room hospital in Milo, Maine, wasn't much of an upgrade from a rustic stable, but by that point, I'm pretty sure my mother wasn't the Virgin Mary! Besides, once my mother realized she was pregnant with me, I doubt she felt like she had been visited by a heavenly angel.

The truth is probably more along these lines:

Cal, I've got some bad news. I think I'm pregnant with your third child! You know I'm hardly through bottle-feeding the last one and the Lord knows I don't have more than two hands! Why on earth can't you men contain yourselves? I read through Dr. Spock's book again and he didn't say a thing about repopulating the earth! As it is, we've already got two mouths to feed on the measly amount you bring home! Now we'll have to divide the pork chop five ways!

Doris, please, you know I love you! Plus, look on the bright side; this one could be a girl! Think of that. You know I've always wanted a little girl! Wouldn't it be nice if we had a little charmer who could sing and play the piano, just like you, honey?

Don't you 'honey' me, Calvin Thorne! You know girls don't run in our family! Besides, now I'm going to look like a beached whale again at Christmas! I won't be able to wear any of the

clothes I just bought with my Green Stamps. You recall how humiliated I was when I was carrying Stephen, your firstborn, into April? I slipped on the icy streets of downtown Houlton and all you did was laugh at your poor pregnant wife crying in a mud puddle! As far as I'm concerned, this child of yours is a curse for any woman and won't amount to much anyway! Girl or boy, we should name this child after you with the first name being, Misconception!

Now should you think I jest, let me put this into perspective. By the time my younger brother, Peter, was born two years later on December 18, my mother had so much to get done before Christmas, she left him in the hospital on layaway and brought him home after the holiday. I kid you not! She's a practical Norwegian! She asked the rest of us if we wanted Christmas cookies or a baby brother. We chose the cookies.

Needless to say, I'm not certain my mother ever had dreams for me—what I'd be as a newborn all the way into adulthood. By the time she finished delivering four boys and rearing them through the turbulent '60s and '70s, finishing her college and master's degrees, handling the transition through three family moves, managing the family finances on a pastor's and teacher's salaries, along with all the rest of her very busy life, she was simply glad I graduated from college and got out of the house! Her ambitions for me, understandably, were not lofty, based on what she observed through my adolescence. I was a long-haired hippie who played guitar and wanted to write songs for a living. I was a dime a dozen in those days.

I'm not the only son in the world who failed to impress his mother. There are lots of us out there. Couples love to dream of what their family life will be like when they eventually have children of their own. Many imagine Christmas morning opening gifts and having the love of family so naturally and beautifully expressed in the spirit of the day. Once they have kids, however, the reality can be less appealing—more like craziness and chaos, trying to get presents wrapped, making sure the kids have an equal number of gifts, having to deal with screaming siblings overdosed on excitement. Then in general, life doesn't play out as we earlier imagine, with opportunities to do things, be places, and have experiences impossible to predict, as well as unforeseen family dramas, perhaps unexpected deaths, broken relations, and even a divorce, as well as other complications, making the once-held dream seem more and more distant from the reality. But that's life. That's what happens.

This isn't a complaint—more of a recognition that dreams are not always the substance of our actual lives. We envision what might happen in its ideal form, but reality takes into account circumstances that could not have been forecast at an earlier time, plus it includes much of the grittiness of experience that gives texture to each person's life. Thus, a mother's dreams are often not fulfilled in any manner reflective of what was once envisioned.

This matter of “unfulfilled dreams” is something that often comes to mind for me whenever I read through the accounts of Mary's story in Luke's Gospel. What the opening chapters of Luke project about the life of Jesus doesn't seem to be fulfilled in the rest of the story.

I grant you, with biblical symbolism always in play, it's hard to say how much, if any, of this story accurately portrays Mary's prenatal experience, given the fact that Luke became acquainted with the Jesus story long after the events of his life had taken place. Who even knows if he had met and spoken with Mary, for Luke was associated with Paul and not closely connected with the Jerusalem church, the place where Mary would have likely lived out the remaining days of her life with her son, James, and her other children. So it's easier to argue that the Gospel account reflects the later beliefs of Jesus' followers, rather than being the personal memoirs of mother Mary.

Nevertheless, it does come to us as part of the Christmas story leading up to Jesus' birth. So we take it seriously for what it says about Jesus and what he was believed to be among his earliest disciples. It's a message presented in the prenatal experiences of Mary, who was the one to bring him into this world out from her own life and womb. Aside from the biological mystery in explaining a virgin birth, the real focus here is not upon Mary's innocence and purity as much as it was on the angel Gabriel's proclamation of who this child would be. Mary would only be the bearer of the child who would become the messianic savior of their people, Israel.

When we hear the story, we might think that Gabriel's message would thrill the young woman, Mary, for what it said about her child. That's possible, but more likely it would be quite daunting. Israel, as such, was an occupied people—a nation broken into various pieces indicative of their own divided history with Galilee in the north and Judea in the south (along with Idumea, Jaffa, and Perea)—all of them politically controlled by Rome under the authoritarian regimes of

Herod and his sons. Over time, a number of rebels had tried to mount an insurrection against the corruption of the Herodian authorities, but to no avail, as both Herod and the Romans were brutal in their suppression of unrest.

So, for the most part, yes—among the masses the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary would have been welcome:

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus [or Joshua, *Yeshua*, meaning, “one who saves”]. He will be great. And will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

In those days, who wouldn't want to hear of a divinely-inspired leader who would eventually emancipate his nation from captivity?

Everyone, of course, except his mother. She would fear the cost.

Mothers like to daydream about their children, particularly the ultimate success of their lives as a demonstration of their own hard work as a parent paying off in rearing their daughter or son. Between the birth and the pinnacle of success are a lot of prayers and worries, upsets and disappointments, that characterize a mother's love for her children. She takes pride in the accomplishments of her children, perhaps more than anyone, but she also carries the burden of wanting them protected and safe throughout their years, even long after they are on their own and beyond her responsibility.

A mother is the one, typically, who nurtures a child and soothes them when he or she is crying or sick. She's the one who embraces her offspring with love, even when they've messed up their lives—when others don't believe they deserve such mercy and care. A mother's dream for her child is not easy and facile; it is hard-earned

hope that one who came from within her will do well in life, even when she is no longer there to protect or help.

So if Mary had imagined her firstborn, Jesus, to become this great messianic figure in the history of her nation, it likely came with endless worries about the risks it would entail. Life is complicated with many demands and sacrifices; reality is harsh, painful, and challenging. It is a much easier choice to keep her son closer to home, watching over a household, than to give him up to his destiny. Mary, in fact, may have made that choice, for as the story is told, Jesus was already well into adulthood (in his thirties!) before he left his home and followed his dream. Once he left, no matter what Mary or the other children did to entreat him to come home, Jesus never returned to his role or place in Nazareth.

As much as it appears on the other end of the story that Mary's prenatal dream missed the mark as to how Jesus' life would eventually play out—instead of ascending to the throne, he was tortured and crucified by those in power like any other rebel—perhaps, Mary's fears would claim otherwise. Her son, Jesus, did follow his destiny and paid the price for it. He did what she likely feared he would do. He would defy the powers that be in the name of God and suffered the same shame as her people had for generations. He lived up to his mother's dreams and embodied all that they hated about their oppressors and suffered for it. After he was crucified on a Roman cross, it would take another miracle from God to alter the course of his destiny, much like what had happened to her in the gestation of his life—one where the Spirit of divine life *would refuse to be denied* by human nature.

Maybe the miracle of his conception within her own life—that of a lowly peasant girl—was the hint for Mary throughout the years of her son’s life until his tortured death that all would be made right in the end. It’s a mother’s intuition, isn’t it? It’s a mother’s prayer. No amount of good or bad press—no matter what people (his own or others) thought of him or believed about him, changed her perception of her son—for better or worse. She viewed him as a gift from God and from deep within her own soul. Hers was a love that would not let him go, even to the day when it became necessary to do so. Her dream was fulfilled in glorious and frightening ways in the path her son followed to his destiny all the way into eternity.

However, on the night of his birth, none of this would matter. When she first heard his newborn cry, Mary could not know what would come of the son she named, Jesus. Savior, or not, she was simply grateful for his little, fragile, and beautiful life, born from her own womb—a miracle child, a gift from God from whence it came and to where it would ultimately go.

That was a dream for any mother who knows that on the day of birth, the safe arrival of her child is the only thing that really matters. That’s all she asks from God. For her child represents and encompasses the eternal gift from God to all mothers everywhere—the gift that evokes the most tender of emotion within. And that, as we know, is love.

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