

Mary, the God Bearer

Advent IV Sermon, December 24, 2017 at St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena, Montana

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning. This morning, we celebrate the Fourth Sunday in Advent. This afternoon, we turn to honoring the birth of Jesus from the Christmas pageant into the Candlelit, Christmas Eve mass.

This morning we have the privilege of pondering the ministry of Mary. She is a young girl living in Nazareth, north of Jerusalem about 100 miles. She is a devout Jew, betrothed to a faithful man named Joseph, of the House of David. An Angel named Gabriel visits her to tell her that she will be God's instrument for something that has never happened before and will never happen again. She is to conceive a son, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, who will be called 'The Son of the Most High'. This son, who is to be called Jesus, is both Son of David and Son of the Most High God. Thus, Jesus is to have a dual identity. He will be both truly God and truly man.

The angel says to her, "you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He is to be great, and Lord God will give to him the throne of his servant David...and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Every time I read this, I start to laugh. Perhaps we are all supposed to laugh about the words of Gabriel! Imagine coming to Mary and saying, "Do not be afraid, Mary." She had to have been scared out of her wits!!!

But she does not argue with the angel. She questions Gabriel, but does not doubt him. She simply wants to know how this will happen. After she receives a brief explanation, she responds with the famous words, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word."

Mary says, "Yes". "Yes" to Gabriel and "Yes" to God. Because she says yes, the incarnation begins. Mary is the first human person to know that there will be a Jesus. She is the first person to love Jesus. She is the first to know that the God of Israel will take the form of a human person and that she will be God's instrument for making that so. She will be called 'Mary Theotokus', the Godbearer who will carry Jesus in her womb for nine months and then bring him into the world in the same way all human beings are brought into the world.

If you go to Nazareth today you are profoundly moved by the Church of the Annunciation which dominates the city's landscape. It was built by the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. It has a tower or 'cupola' which looks like an upside-down lily, the flower which often symbolizes Mary. Beneath the tower is a two story church, built that way to symbolize the meeting of heaven and earth.

In the courtyard surrounding the church and all around the second floor of the interior, are artistic renderings of the Madonna from countries all over the world. The American "Madonna" is particularly striking and to some, rather unattractive, almost gaudy. But if you have the privilege of looking at it many times it grows on you! Mary is surrounded by the swirling power of the Holy Spirit. The rendering is three dimensional and the artistic material is steel. There is no question that Mary is a woman of steel. She had to be, in order to endure what she was called to endure, which included witnessing her son die on the cross. Later, she is elevated as first among the saints and Queen of Heaven.

Mary was indeed a woman of steel. But I think there is another reason for the artist to choose steel as his medium. The Roman Catholic Church in America at the time this Church of the Annunciation was built was very much a church of immigrants: Irish, Italian, German, Polish, Eastern European and elsewhere. Many of the best of those immigrants made their living in the steel factories and the automobile industry. How appropriate that an American Catholic rendering of the Mother of God be made out of steel.

Let's take a few moments to refresh our memory of Mary's vocation from the annunciation to what the catholic tradition teaches as her assumption into Heaven. In the wake of her miraculous pregnancy, we should recall the incredible scandal from which Joseph rescued her. In Deuteronomy 22:20 the Jewish law is very clear that, "if the evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of the town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel." Mary's life would always manifest a deep, faithful love at the cost of great suffering.

Mary then makes her way south to the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is carrying her miracle son, John the Baptist. When Elizabeth and Mary meet, Mary bursts forth in the singing of the Magnificat. She stays with her cousin for nearly three months and then returns to Nazareth. Then John the Baptist is born and named by his father, Zechariah.

As the time of the birth of Jesus approaches, Mary and Joseph make their way south to Bethlehem, the City of David, because Joseph and Jesus through Joseph, are of the house and lineage of David. On Jesus' fortieth day, the parents bring Jesus to the Temple to present him. They meet two old, faithful Jews, Anna and Simeon. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms praising God that 'his eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.' Then Simeon turns to Mary and warns her, 'that this child has been set for the falling and rising of many in Israel and 'a sword shall pierce through your own soul too.' Once again, Mary's love and suffering will be intertwined.

Once again, great acts of God are accompanied by great efforts of the enemy to sabotage such acts. The birth is surrounded by Herod's fury, trying to kill all of the boys in the realm under the age of two. The infant, John the Baptist, is among those with such qualifications. But he is saved, as is Jesus, who escapes with his mother to Egypt. When the coast is clear, Joseph takes Mary to Nazareth where their son is raised.

At this point in Jesus' biography we enter what are often called the 'unknown years of Jesus'. With the exception of the incident in the Temple when Jesus gets separated from his parents, we can only speculate about these unknown years of Jesus. We hear about him next at age 30 when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Nevertheless, there are many things we can safely say about Jesus' upbringing. We can be certain that Jesus' parents raised their son as a devout, practicing, orthodox Jew. We can be certain that many factors influenced Jesus growing up in Nazareth. His teaching included references to farmers and shepherds. He learned his father's trade, which would have been particularly fortunate after Joseph passes out of the picture and presumably dies. Jesus would have lived in community with many other families and he surely would have been immersed in the Hebrew scriptures.

More than anything else, we must remind ourselves of how loving and devoted Jesus' parents must have been, to raise a child to be the healthiest human being to ever exist. Jesus would have been raised

with unique courage, faith and a loving discipline in order to learn what he did and to have the courage to follow the vocation which his heavenly father had bestowed upon him.

After Jesus left Nazareth, his mother followed him along with several others, in addition to the twelve apostles. Mary must have wondered often what his son was up to, testing her faith and trying her limited knowledge. How often Mary must have uttered the prayer, "Lord, I do not understand you, but trust you."

Nothing must have tried her faith more than to see her son die on a cross. Crucifixion was the most heinous punishment ever dreamed up by human cruelty. The crucifixion is Mary's unimaginable suffering from seeing her son die. It is not supposed to happen that way. When I was first ordained, I served in a parish where a teenager had just died in an automobile crash during her senior prom. Is there a worse nightmare? The parents were, of course, inconsolable. My mentor said to me, that after being in the parish ministry for 25 years, he was convinced that the worst pain in human life was for a parent to have to watch her child die. Perhaps it was in God's plan to ask Mary to endure such suffering, so that all mothers for all time, who had to endure the loss of their child, would at least know that God knew their suffering and that they would not have to endure their suffering alone....

We also know that it was from the cross, that Jesus handed his mother over to the care of his disciple John. From that moment John took Mary into his own home. We also think that John died in Ephesus, so he must have taken Mary with him. There are actually two traditions about Mary's latter years. One is that she died in Ephesus. The other is that she died in Jerusalem where Jesus came and took her safely to heaven where she reigns to this day as Queen of Heaven and First among the Saints. As an infant, Jesus had been held in his mother's arms. After Mary's death, it was Jesus who carried his mother in his arms to dwell in eternity.

We honor Mary. We do not worship her. She is first among the saints, but she remains human not divine. Without Mary there would not have been an incarnation. Through her, there was.

Mary also becomes for us the model of discipleship. Mary is the model for us and for all time of what it means to be obedient to whatever God asks us to do. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

She is also the example for all of us of what it means to carry the living Christ in our soul and to witness to him, both in word and actions. Mary is the model of what it means to make room for Jesus in our souls so that he may have his way with us.

I have never been pregnant. But I have known many woman, including my mother, my wife and my daughter, who have been. If I have learned anything from them, it is that once you are pregnant, your life is no longer your own. The truth is that no one's life is one's own. We have all been bought with a price. Christ's love for us came with the cost of his life. No human being knew that more than Mary. Throughout her life she would experience the inevitable relationship between love and suffering. She remains for us the model of faithful obedience, the cost of discipleship and the way of glory her son's resurrection opened to all believers.

All of this started with Mary's annunciation. For that we give thanks and pray that as Mary was faithful to her calling, we may be faithful to ours, as we make room for the arrival of the Son of the Most High. Amen

