

II Samuel 7: 1-11, 16  
Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26  
Romans 16: 25-27  
St. Luke 1: 26-38

Advent IV 2020.

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And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”  
St. Luke 1: 38a

In the last parish I served, there was a couple who had two daughters. As the younger daughter was learning to read, she went through the normal process of struggling and then gaining confidence, reading with books with lots of pictures, to reading books with *fewer* pictures. But as some young readers might have moved on to *Anne of Green Gables* or *Harry Potter* or the “Henry Huggins” series or whatever, this young girl surprised her mother by asking for her recipe books... Cookbooks... She would spend long periods reading about ingredients and cooking times – not the typical thing for a young reader to digest... and her mother noticed it. This little girl has now grown up, and recently graduated from – you guessed it – culinary college. She is well on her way to becoming a first-class chef... The first clue was when she was reading cookbooks, as a little girl...

In the King’s College University chapel in Halifax, there’s a beautiful rendering of the boy Jesus, when he is about 12 years old, speaking with the elders in the temple. We remember the story – after returning from the Passover observances, Jesus became separated from his parents. After searching for him frantically for three days, Mary and Joseph eventually find their son in the Temple. Young Jesus is absolutely calm. He is exactly where he was supposed to be. We read that he went with his parents and was obedient to them, and “(quote) his mother kept all these things in her heart...” Attentive mothers and fathers *notice* what their kids are doing...

What Mary went through is almost unimaginable. Losing her son at 12 years of age is not the only time that Mary’s heart was pierced. Mary worried about Jesus’ well-being during his ministry, when he gave so much of himself to the crowds. So many mothers are worried about their young adult children. How much more was Mary anxious, when her Son gave so much, with so little apparent thought for himself?... Mary was there when Jesus was crucified, following the horrible torture. Can we imagine – can we imagine? – the anguish of Mary’s heart?... And wonder of wonders, Mary likely knew of Christ’s glorious resurrection...

The end of the story with Mary and her son Jesus is stunning... But let’s not overlook the circumstances of Jesus’ conception and birth, which we read about in Luke this morning...

Luke simply introduces us to a young woman named Mary from Nazareth, in the north country, who was engaged to a young man in the village, Joseph.

Mary's life is about to be changed, for ever... A messenger of God – Gabriel, an angel – greets Mary, because she has been so highly favoured. Gabriel reveals to Mary that she will have a son, named Jesus. “Jesus” is a derivative of the name “Joshua,” which means, “The Lord Saves...” Even at his conception, Jesus’ destiny is clear! The ancient Hebrews understood that names have power. Somehow – Mary could not have understood it all – her Son would be instrumental in bringing about the salvation of God’s people...

Very likely stunned by Gabriel’s presence and bewildered by his message, Mary asks how this can be, because she has not been sexually intimate with any man. Gabriel reassures Mary, and tells her of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Just as our conceptions were, by God’s will, through the unique coming together from father and mother, so the incarnation of Jesus is through the unique coming together of divinity and humanity in one individual – Jesus of Nazareth...

Mary utterly surrenders to this news – news which will change not only her life for ever, but Joseph’s – and ultimately, the whole world is changed through the incarnation of Jesus...

Mary has been revered in the Church, and for good reason. She was a unique instrument of God for the world’s salvation. Her piety, faith and humility are clearly evident on the pages of scripture.

But if I have a concern, it is this: Whenever we hold up heroes, rather than encouraging us to reach higher in our own pursuit of God, they can sometimes have the opposite effect. Instead of identifying with them and wanting to have faith like theirs, we can sometimes fall into the trap of admiring them, while at the same time thinking that we can *never* be like them. We can give up trying, rather than trying harder, with the help of the Lord...

None of us will take the role of Mary. The Blessed Virgin Mary had a unique role in bearing and raising Jesus, the Son of God... But we are called to admire and copy her devotion to God, her humility, and her complete obedience to what would have been a shocking pregnancy in rural ancient Palestine... Traditionally the Church has encouraged women to admire Mary’s qualities. But those of us who are men should also pay close attention to how Mary lived, and responded to the presence of the Lord in her life...

Mary is not the only hero of the faith, of course. The Christian family is full of all kinds of devoted people, who have so much to teach us about living for the Lord. I encourage us all to get to know them. But let’s be very clear – the heroes of the faith (all the great saints of past and present, known and unknown), are not ends in themselves... They teach us how to meet *Jesus*, and we learn from them so we can meet Jesus for ourselves, to live for him as Jesus Christ lives in us...

Paul explains,

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

(I Corinthians 3: 21-23)

Let's see Mary, the blessed mother of the Lord, for the wonderful person she is. But let us also give praise and thanks for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, who is our strength and our song, and our salvation...

Amen.