

Impossible Mothers

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Luke 1:39–45

Today's Gospel reading brings together two very unlikely mothers-to-be. One is old enough to be your grandmother and perhaps even your great-grandmother. Her name is Elizabeth. The child, six months old in the womb, is John the Baptizer. The other woman is young, we'd still call her a "girl" I suppose, but in her day she was young woman ready to be married. Perhaps 16 or so. Her name is Mary.

From all outward appearances, Elizabeth's pregnancy is the miraculous one. Who ever heard of a great-grandmother conceiving and bearing a child? That would amaze even us scientifically skeptical people. The miracle of the second mother, however, is hidden to the eye, a matter of faith. She is a virgin, betrothed but not yet married to a man named Joseph. Against everything we know about reproductive biology, she too is pregnant. Not in the way most people would assume, but "by the Holy Spirit." Her child is not just any child, but the incarnate second Person of the eternal, undivided Holy Trinity. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God.

And yet the world would not recognize this miracle. We know beyond all scientific doubt that virgins simply do not conceive. It is a biological impossibility. Joseph knew that. His initial reaction was to call off the marriage in private and give Mary the opportunity to go and marry the rightful father of her child. It was a gracious gesture on the part of Joseph who could have exposed Mary to public shame and ridicule, perhaps even stoning as an adulteress. But Joseph knew this much. Virgins don't conceive. Old women like Elizabeth? Well, that's strange. Weird even. Not something you really want to think about all too hard. But not outside the realm of conceivable.

What is inconceivable is that a Virgin would conceive and bear a son. It took an angel in a dream to convince Joseph that "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." And Joseph had to believe this, over and against his reason, his common sense, the sideways glances of the relatives and neighbors, and everything he knew. He had to trust the Word of

the Lord through the angel and receive Mary has his pregnant bride knowing full well that the child was not his and trusting completely that this child was God's.

It's not surprising, then, that Mary hurries off to the hill country of Judea to cousin Elizabeth. There was a day when the inconceivably pregnant went off to live with the aunt in Nebraska or the cousin in Kansas. Get her out of the prying public eye of Nazareth and have her stay for a while with Elizabeth. It will be better for both of them, because the unbelieving world is not going to put the best construction on this, and still doesn't. It's pretty much an annual event now to have Christmas specials out of the news department rounding up so-called "biblical scholars" who speculate on "what really happened with Mary" and who the father of the child likely was. You always know who the mother is.

Would you have believed Mary if she were your daughter or your fiancée? Would you, like Joseph, have rearranged your whole life and all your expectations on the basis of a dream? You and I are confronted by the same thing all the time – the Word versus our perception of things.

Our perception says "nothing but water," but the Word says "Baptism, a washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Our perception says "bread and wine," but the Word says "This is my Body, this is my Blood." Our perception says "sinner," but the Word says, "Saint in Christ, forgiven, justified." We're called to trust a Word of forgiveness and to rearrange our lives in its freedom. Our reason tells us that we have to make amends, we must atone for our sins, we must work our way into God's favor, but the Word says, "I forgive you all of your sins."

We look at Mary and we don't know what to think. But the Word tells us what to believe. This is the God-bearer, the mother of the Son of God. The choir has a great carol tomorrow night with a line that refers to Mary: For in this rose contained was heaven and earth in little space. The infinite only-begotten. The eternal Word become flesh. In the womb of His virgin mother.

Luke tells us that when Mary approached Elizabeth's house and Elizabeth heard the sound of Mary's voice, John leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb. Not just the usual kick but a leap of prophetic joy. John was preaching in utero! That fact alone needs to be highlighted on several fronts. Let's be done with this notion that you aren't fully human until you're born, as though human life in the womb is something less than human. John is leaping with joy at the sound

of the voice of His Lord's mother. Don't be sucked in by the rhetoric of those who would deny full humanity to the unborn. John will kick in protest against that.

And let's be done finally with the notion that babies in utero have no relationship with the Word and that newborns and infants have no relationship with God. Remember Psalm 22: "Yet thou art he who took me from the womb; thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts. Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God." John kicks against all who would deny faith to infants or baptism into the death of Jesus, their Savior.

John is preaching, prophesying pointing to Jesus already even before he's born. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Barely conceived, and yet John rejoices over Him. Mary is barely "showing" at this point, and yet Jesus is fully Lord and Savior even now. Whatever we have to say about life in the womb must be shaped by these two, John and Jesus, in their respective mothers.

Elizabeth is prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak. What she says are not her words but Spirit-ed words, faith words, words that go far beyond what we can see and know for ourselves. She says them for us, that we would be clear in our thinking and believing.

She blesses Mary and her Child. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" By the Spirit, Elizabeth looks beyond the outward scandal of a barely wed pregnant Virgin and sees blessing. Blessed is Mary among women. I'm not so sure she feels terribly "blessed" at the moment, leaving a doubtful fiance and skeptical community. Her life has been turned upside down. Yet she is "blessed among women." Most highly favored lady.

Luther was fond of saying that where the Gospel is there is also the cross. There is great and profound truth here. Something that we may not want to here within all the preciousness of what we call "Christmas." Where Christ is, there will always be the cross. Blessing comes with the cross. Mary is blessed, yet she must bear the cross of being a virgin mother with all the scandal and doubt that this entails. And blessed also is the fruit of her womb. Her son Jesus. He is blessed too. Blessed to die. Blessed to bear the sins of the world. Blessed to be a blessing to all the world in His death. Again, blessing and cross are inexorably joined together as one.

Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Elizabeth, moved by the Spirit, is humbled with the humility of faith, recognizing that this is not simply a younger cousin come to keep her company, but as she puts it, "the mother of my Lord." It took

literally hundreds of years for the church to muster the theological insight and courage to confess what Elizabeth says so easily. This young girl named Mary, her cousin, is the “mother of my Lord.”

We might find ourselves balking at that at time. “Mother of God” seems a bit over the top. “Too Roman Catholic” some might argue. We don’t believe in all that Mary stuff. True, we don’t say that she is the Queen of heaven or the co-redemptrix. We don’t pray to her or seek her intercessions in the hour of our death. But we dare not deny her or diminish her. To do this would be to deny the Incarnation of our Lord, the fact that He has a body that He gives once for all into death, a body and a blood that He gives us in the Supper, a body that can be offered up for the life of the world. When we deny Mary or diminish her, we deny and diminish that humanity of Christ. God alone can’t save us because God can’t die. He must take on our humanity, become Man, the Word must become Flesh. And it is precisely through the means of His mother that Jesus shares in our humanity.

An ancient Promise is revisited and revealed. Through the seed of the woman comes salvation. “I will make enmity between you and the woman, between her seed and yours.” The seed of the woman. Man is not involved here. Only the woman. Eve was deceived and brought sin into the world. Mary believed and brought salvation into the world. Eve was the mother of all the living; Mary is the mother of the One who is Life and Light of all. Eve bore a son from the Lord; Mary bore a son who is the Lord. Elizabeth’s Lord, your Lord.

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Blessed are you who believe that the Word of God is fulfilled in you, that by your Baptism into Christ Jesus you have overcome sin and death and now stand justified before God. Blessed are you, who in the way of Mary, believe the inconceivable wonder that her child is God’s Child is your Lord come to save you.

Today we are confronted with two unlikely mothers – one very old, the other a virgin. With God nothing is impossible.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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