

Joy is a choice

Luke 1:39-45

December 20, 2009

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today ...*

“Be born in us today.” Do you realize what you are asking for when you sing that line? You are asking to bear the child! You are asking to be Mary! Whoa!

I have oftentimes tried to imagine Mary’s feelings and thoughts as she carried and birthed this baby, but I know that when I hear the story I don’t put myself in her place. That would rather hard! I’m not a woman. I don’t know what it is like to be pregnant. I cannot imagine what it is like to be pregnant.

But for all of us, men and women, it is a much harder task to imagine what it was like to be a woman in that culture, at that time, and to be pregnant under those circumstances. When we hear the stories of Jesus’ birth, we don’t put ourselves in Mary’s place. We don’t wonder what it would be like to bear the child. We look at the manger from a distance; we do not hover over it. We are observers, watching the events of that night unfold.

We are not Mary, but we are not the shepherds either. We are not terrified when we hear the news. We’re not pushed well out of our comfort zone, astonished and amazed by what we are told and by what we can see with our own eyes.

I think we are most like the visitors from the east, outsiders who come late to the scene, witnesses of this extraordinary event, acknowledging its significance, understanding in some way its implications for all humanity, offering our gifts of respect and praise, and then, after we have spent some time honoring the child, going our own way, going back home, going back to our regular lives.

But Mary can’t go back to her regular life! That’s gone forever! She’s a mother now. What would it be like to see things through her eyes? To experience these events through her body? To let the holy child of Bethlehem be born in us? What could we learn from Mary?

Listen again to what Elizabeth said to her:

How happy you are to believe that the Lord’s message to you will come true!

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How happy you are to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true!
Do you hear it? Do you get it?

Say it with me this way: "How happy I am to believe that the Lord's message to me will come true." What makes you happy? To believe! To believe the Lord's message to you will come true!

Mary was blessed, Mary was happy, because she believed, because she believed the Lord's message to her would come true. She was not blessed because her life was especially good or easy. She was not happy because she had a lot to be happy about. She was blessed because of what God had called her to do. She was happy because she believed what the Lord told her about her own life and the life of the child she would bear. This is what we have to learn from Mary.

So try to put yourself in her place. Try to be Mary ...

You are young, probably fourteen or fifteen, most of your life still ahead of you, all the experiences and responsibilities of adulthood quite new to you.

You are poor. Even with the support of the husband to whom you are promised, you will be among the underclass of a people who are themselves an underclass.

You are a woman in a culture dominated by men, a Jew in a world dominated by Romans, an unwed mother-to-be among friends and relatives and a husband who will find it hard to understand.

This is your life. This is your hard life. But now, at this one moment, the only fact that matters is that you are pregnant ... God knows how! That's your reality: your body weighed down by the baby growing within you, your spirit weighed down by feelings you've never known before, all of it strange and new and mysterious to you.

The thought of it all -- how it happened, what people are thinking, how it will all come out -- is overwhelming, but it is the more practical, mundane matters that preoccupy you: the morning sickness, the nine months of carrying, laboring, waiting, wondering, and then after that the feeding, washing, providing, protecting, teaching, training, holding.

It is there. He is there! You cannot escape it. You cannot retreat from it. This is now your life.

Yours is the burden of pregnancy. Yours is the burden of this pregnancy. Yours is the burden of carrying ... the Son of the Most High God? The Savior of his people? The king of the descendants of Jacob?

You have been told this is your task. You have been told you have been called to fulfill this vital role in the history of God's salvation of the world. You are not promised the gift of God's blessing; you are told you play a part in providing it!

But, how can this be? It is utterly beyond your comprehension. And, you think, how can it be -- me? It is more than you can bear. What if ... you fail? What if ... you miscarry? What if ... you cannot protect him? What if ... you cannot take care of him? What if ...?

If you are Mary, these are just some of your questions. These are just some of your thoughts. So if you are Mary, how do you feel? Are you happy?

She was happy, because she believed that the Lord's message to her would come true. Because she believed she could embrace her life as it was, with all its burdens of uncertainty and mystery and demand and difficulty. She was happy because she chose to embrace her life as it was, not to begrudge it, not to regret it, not to wish her life was something different than what it was, not to wish God has chosen someone else.

She was happy because she chose it. Joy is a choice.

Joy is a choice, a choice Mary made, and a choice others have made too. Lory Hornung chose joy. Lory lived over one third of her life under the shadow of multiple sclerosis, but those of you who know her know she did not let the disease take her spirit along with her body. She refused to get down. She refused to indulge in self-pity. She embraced her life as it was.

Let me share with you, for the sake of all of you who loved her, and for the sake of all of you who did not know her, a short excerpt from the remarks I gave at her memorial service last Monday ...

Lory's life was short and hard, but we do not pity her. We will not pity her, because she did not pity herself. It is the height of despair to regret one's own life, to wish it were different, to wish it were other, than what it is. But Lory was not filled with regret. She chose to live the life she had. She chose to live with MS.

You might think she had no choice in the matter, but she did! She could not choose whether or not to have MS, but she could choose whether or not to live with it. She chose to accept it, not merely enduring it, putting up with it, straining to overcome it, pretending to ignore it, but living with it as part of herself ... which it was. She lived the life she had, as it was, with good humor, with genuine faith, and with ready love for those who were dear to her.

Lory did not die until she died. She continued to live day by day with gratitude for the life she had and without fear of the death that she knew would soon come.

Lory chose joy, just as Mary chose joy. They did not begrudge their lives, as they were, but they embraced their lives, as they were, with faith, with courage, relying on God's help, trusting in God's promise.

This is what we have to learn from Mary. This is what we have to learn from Lory. We admire their courage. the choices they were able to make, and yet, at the same time, we are glad we are not them. We are glad Lory's life is not ours. We are glad Mary's life is not ours.

But that's the point! You are not Lory. You are not Mary. You are called to embrace the life you have, as it is! How happy you are to believe that the Lord's message to you will come true. Do you hear it? Do you get it?