

“Gifts”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
IV Advent – 20 December 2009  
Luke 1:39-55

Mary was pregnant, waiting for she knew not what: waiting for Joseph to accept or reject her; waiting for the morning sickness and the strange cravings; waiting to grow radiant and rotund; waiting to die, waiting to live.

If you think out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy is a scandal today, just imagine how hazardous Mary’s condition was 2,000 years ago. You could be lawfully killed for it. Everything depended upon decisions made by others, decisions Mary could not influence much less control. But what did she do after the angel Gabriel arrived with his shocking news? Did Mary go into hiding, conceal herself for fear of being exposed? No, she went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was herself pregnant with the baby who would grow up to become John, the Baptist.

No withering wallflower, that Mary. No, she got on the road to help her cousin deliver that baby; stayed for three months. Maybe this was Mary’s way of getting out of sight for awhile, but her words say otherwise. As Mary approached, Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth somehow knew that this movement within her was special.

In response to Elizabeth’s joyous outburst, Mary herself uttered one of the most elegant hymns of praise ever offered to God, one very similar to Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving in I Samuel. We know it well, and we know from it that Mary is in no way ashamed of her gift from God. No, she rejoices in what God is accomplishing through her.

Forget the swollen ankles that were sure to come several months down the road. Don't worry about the potential controversy that might arise much sooner, as people began to notice, and wonder where this baby came from to an unwed mother, betrothed to Joseph who either needed to hustle up and make an honest woman out of her, or needed to exercise his rights, fulfill the law, forsake the harlot, and have her cast out or worse.

Mary seems supremely unconcerned about all those possibilities as she celebrates with Elizabeth. Their faith in God's power and goodness enabled them to delight in a situation that would have normally been an unmitigated disaster for everyone involved. Despite the danger, Mary said, "Yes," not just on the first day when Gabriel delivered the news, but every day after until she delivered Jesus.

We too are pregnant, though not with child, waiting in Advent for what we know and for what we know not: waiting for a birth that has already changed the world; waiting for a King to return in glory; waiting for a gift hidden within us to burst forth.

We do not face the sort of severe risk that Mary faced, but we do suspect that the gift God has granted us may change our lives, if we let it out and let it grow. The gift we nurture will not have an impact equal to what Mary's gift made, but through the gift she so courageously received, each of our gifts have enhanced potential. Through Jesus, the grace God pours through us can alter a life, shape a community, nudge an entire society, and even whisper to the world.

The question for each of us is, "Will we bear the gift, no matter the danger, the discomfort, and the distinct sense we get that the gift is ours to accept and share, but not to control?"

Many of us avoid dealing with that question by denying that God has ever given us any gifts. Some believe that everything they are and all that they've got, they earned by the hard work or cleverness, but the truth is that without exception human beings depend upon God and each other.

If you don't believe me, try going into business without any customers or employees. If nobody's willing to work with you or for you, and if nobody's willing to buy what you're selling, then you don't actually have a business. We are inherently interdependent creatures.

Likewise, we depend on God for our very life and identity. This isn't to discourage personal initiative and effort. However, there is a popular but false myth floating around that people pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and don't owe anybody anything. It's an appallingly arrogant attitude, and those who suffer from it need to repent and get into right relationship with God.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are some who avoid the question about what to do with the gift of God within them by declaring that they have never received such a gift, because they are unworthy to serve as vessels of God's grace. Those who think such thoughts need to reconsider.

First of all, God decides who is worthy to receive His gifts: not you, not the people who make fun of you, not the people you envy, not the people who have told you in various nefarious ways that you aren't worth a wad of used bubblegum. God chooses who is worthy, and His criteria differ significantly from what the prominent people of any given age deem worthy.

Exhibit A: God's choice of an unwed, impoverished, teenager to bear His only Son in human form so that the world might be saved. Exhibit B: God's choice of an orphan on the lam from a murder rap, who was instructed to return to the scene of his crime and convince the most powerful person on the planet at the time to release thousands of valuable slaves. God thought Mary and Moses worthy. Who cares what anybody else thinks?

I could go through an entire alphabet of exhibits before I could get out of the Bible and into the saints, none of whom were named "Most Likely to Succeed" in their high school yearbook, not that you can't be a saint, even if you were. The point is, God chooses who is worthy to receive, bear, and share his gifts, and believe it or not, God chooses you.

So what will you do with that precious gift God has planted deep down inside your soul? For some, the first step is yet to be taken, and that step involves figuring out what the gift is and how it can be shared with others. This is a work of prayer.

Prayer intimidates a lot of people, because few of us are public speakers, and when the audience is God, the tension level gets a little higher. The misperception that drives our reluctance to pray is that we have to come up with a fancy speech, when in fact all we need do is to listen. Of course, listening can be tougher than talking, because to listen, we have to be quiet, and being silent is one of the most counter-cultural actions we can take. It isn't fast or easy, but silence is worthwhile, if it leads us to an understanding of how God wants to work through us.

Then that prayerful conversation needs to be shared with others, so that the wisdom of the community, and the prayers of many, can be brought to bear on what we

hear from God. This can be difficult, because we live in a culture that savors the confession of tawdry offences, but seems afraid of or embarrassed by truly substantial conversation. It takes a lot of courage and trust to seek out people with whom you can share a treasure dear as what God gives. However, we need to remember that the spiritual flame that keeps our community warm also sheds light.

Once prayer has helped us discern what gift God has given us to bear, it's our turn to share that gift with the world. We may hesitate, because the gift and the Giver can be slightly scary. We might be concerned that the world may not be too eager to receive the gift we have to share. But that didn't stop Mary.

Many people rejected Jesus. They were so confused and offended by him that they conspired in his death, and Mary lived long enough to watch it all unfold. She could not have anticipated any of this, though she may have suspected that when you bear something so precious, trouble may accompany the joy of it. What Mary knew without a doubt is that her gift came from God, a God who makes and keeps promises, a God who loves the underdog and deflates the haughty.

We, too, know this: that the gift God has given us can bring great blessing to those with whom we share it. Not all will receive the gift gladly; others will reject it outright. But many will accept it with gladness, and God will be glorified. God's gift to you may be simple or spectacular. It depends primarily on how you look at it. But you cannot let it sit there undiscovered or unused. Find it. Name it. Share it. Enjoy it.

It's already happening. Most of us have found at least one gift God has given us, and we've let it loose to live and grow, to nurture others. Keep it up. Celebrate your

giftedness, and when the path gets a bit rough, remember fearless Mary. Magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior. Amen.

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