

I come in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Picture this! A typical modern day, 14-year-old girl, drops her backpack on the floor, sits down at the dinner table and says, “Mom, dad, I’m pregnant.” From a father’s perspective, the conversation might start with: “How did that happen? Who is the father?” And then, “You just threw away your whole future! What will the neighbors think? What will the Soccer Club think? Our reputation is ruined.” And so on.

Now, let’s turn the clock back to around 4 BCE. In that time and place, Israel was under Roman rule. It was a time of violence, racial tension, illness, and corruption. It was a patriarchal society driven by honor and reputation. Males were the face and voice of the family.

The role of a female was to marry and bear children. She was considered property, had no social status, or value. At about age 14, the father made an agreement with someone to marry his daughter. It is called an arranged marriage. She had no choice in the matter. Marrying a young girl improved the odds that she was a virgin, and would maximize the window for child-bearing. An arranged marriage was like merging two businesses today. It formed social and economic unions between families. It was a transaction, and the bride was part of the property exchange.

Let’s focus on the house of Joachim and Anna, Mary’s parents.

When I think of the Virgin Mary, I envision the bathtub grotto. She is a lily-white-skinned, blue-eyed, European Mary, fragile as a china doll, donning a blue and white robe.

In reality, Mary was a rugged, brown-skinned, deep brown-eyed, dark-haired, poor, farm girl. She would perform the chores associated with being a female in an agricultural family, such as working in the field, or with livestock, or retrieving water. Her field-worn hands, strong shoulders, fit body, with sun-drenched skin attest to a hard-working lifestyle. Yet, she was humble, unconditionally trusted God, and described herself as the handmaiden of the Lord.

Earlier in Luke, we hear Mary agreeing to be the mother of Jesus when she was visited by an angel. She probably felt the need to inform her parents that she was pregnant. Now, being engaged and pregnant was not necessarily uncommon, as long as both parties were legally able to marry. With Joseph not being the biological father, this situation would likely bring dishonor to her family, destining them to become social outcasts.

Scripture doesn't say anything about that conversation. By keeping the context in mind, and what IS and IS NOT said in scripture, let's imagine how the conversation may have gone.

Joachim asks, "Who is the father?" Mary replies, "An angel told me I would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. By the way, Aunt Elizabeth is 6-months

pregnant.” Joachim, then asks, “So, does Joseph know about this?” She replies, “Well, not yet, I just found out myself.” “Perhaps you should tell him.” “I will.” “An angel? By the Holy Spirit? Oy Veh!”

Today, our Gospel tells the story about Mary making a trek to visit her Aunt Elizabeth. History and tradition tell us the distance may have been about 70 miles, taking about 4 days, riding in a caravan. Travel was not always safe. Violence and thievery were common. Scripture also doesn’t say whether anybody tried to stop a pregnant 14-year-old girl from making long, somewhat dangerous, trip through the desert to visit her aunt. AND we are told that Mary went IN HASTE. What’s the rush?

In Matthew’s account, Joseph was planning to divorce her. Perhaps he did not buy pregnant by the Holy Spirit story. Would you? It is not unreasonable to think that all involved needed time apart to sort things out.

So, Mary arrives and enters the house, and yells, “Aunt Liz! I’m here!” An elated Elizabeth greets her! “Mary! It is wonderful to see you! You have such a glow about you!” Luke tells us that Elizabeth “received the Holy Spirit”, and was deeply moved. No one told Elizabeth about Mary’s pregnancy, but yet she knew. Mary barely knew herself. We don’t hear anything about Zechariah, but know that God rendered him mute earlier in Luke’s Gospel.

Let's pause and review. We have Elizabeth, aged, who believes in the power of God. Faithful and pregnant! We have Mary, young, who believes in the power of God. Faithful and pregnant! We hear nothing from Zechariah or Joseph. Both are silent, and both doubted the power of God. Silent and skeptical.

In the story, the 'men of the house' voices were silent. The disposable and powerless voices of Elizabeth and Mary came to the forefront. God's plan was unfolding through two very unlikely individuals, two women, faithful and strong, who were carrying the seeds of profound change in the world, change that will usher in a new era.

But wait! There's more! It was not enough to bring Mary to the forefront. In Luke, Mary proclaims the Magnificat. In Advent 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian-martyr, called the Magnificat our oldest Advent hymn. He says that it is not sung by a gentle, tender, dreamy Mary, but rather from a passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary. We hear, through Mary, that nothing is impossible with God.

She not only praises God for what He has done for her, but also for all of Israel. Fr. Robert Maloney writes, "Today, we recognize Mary's Magnificat as a rousing freedom song of the poor. Mary, epitomizes the lowly of Israel, those marginalized by society. God is her only hope, and she sings the divine praises with exuberant confidence."

“Mary believed that God can turn the world upside down; that the last are first and the first last; the humble are exalted, the exalted humbled; those who save their life lose it, those who lose their life save it; those who mourn will rejoice, those who laugh will cry; the mighty are cast down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up. She and they were convinced **that in God’s kingdom**, the poor are first, and the prostitutes, publicans and outcasts of society eat at the table of the Lord.”
Mary sings the praise of a God of liberation! Great story! So what?

Elizabeth and Mary show us that even during trying times, we have every reason to rejoice! These voiceless and marginalized women rest in God’s affection for those who are struggling and suffering, and have faith that God will rescue Israel in the future. They did not allow world views, assumptions, and logic to obstruct that vision, or dampen their joy. God would ultimately raise up the marginalized, and humble the proud and powerful.

Do you approach life like Zechariah or Joseph? Skeptical. Dismissive. Do you discount or discard the voices that do not fit your world view? Do your biases and assumptions cloud your vision?

Or, do you find joy and hope in God’s love and providence, regardless of life’s situations? Can you see when the seeds of change are planted in the voices of the homeless, a rebellious teenager, or that person with mental illness?

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Can you hear God's words of hope through the voices of children, elderly, disabled, or the helpless? Can hope cut through the uncertainty of our time? Yes!

Even in our chaotic and noisy world, God continues to bring us hope, and sometimes that hope comes from the most unexpected places. Sadly, the joyous news of hope sometimes gets lost in the winds of uncertainty, or drowned out by the static of biases, assumptions, and judgments. But Hope is everywhere!

May you seek to sift through the noise to hear the whispers of hope. May you listen for God's voice. May you unconditionally trust Him. May you believe in Him. May you be liberated by Him. And, like Mary, a poor and marginalized farm girl, may you Rejoice knowing nothing is impossible with God! Amen.