

Sermon for Advent 4C 2021 (BCP)

Seminarian Bonnie Scott

Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

“Blessed.” Mary, the mother of Jesus is Blessed. As we prepare for Christmas, anticipating the joy of Jesus’s birth—the birth of our Savior—it is easy from this vantage to think of Mary as Blessed. *She* was chosen by God above all other women to carry His Son. “Blessed are *you* among women” Elizabeth says to Mary as her child leaps for joy within her. And yet, as Mary comes to the hill country to be with Elizabeth, she is a pregnant and yet unwed woman. Based on the societal standards of this time, she is lowly. No one would look upon Mary and think her Blessed. No one except Elizabeth, who is incredulous that she should be worthy of a visit from the mother of her Lord—from the woman who consented to God’s will despite whatever hardships such a task would bring.

To be blessed with a child is not without its share of suffering, not without its immeasurable joys. As we know and await just 6 days before Christmas, Mary gave birth in a manger with little worldly comforts. She suffered the pains of childbirth. She gave birth to her son, a son she must have loved with all of herself. What happiness must she have felt at hearing his first cries? At holding him to her chest, feeling his small life next to hers? A newborn child is so full of possibility, of life.

We know the rest of the story. We know from the gospels of Jesus’s life, we know of his death on the cross, of his resurrection. We know, perhaps some of us more intimately than others, of the pain a mother suffers in having a child, in watching a child suffer, in losing a child.

My husband Joey and I have two dear friends, Miriam and Stuart. When their oldest son Sam was just 25, he died tragically. Five years later, their second child Amos died. When I first met Miriam, it had only been a year since her second child had died; her grief was raw. She was traveling around the country to visit the friends of her children, to be reminded of the many stages of their lives beyond their childhood home in Brooklyn. A loving pilgrimage with precious shrines at each stop and we were the first. The first time I met Miriam she was gracious, loving, present—she told me of her grief, unfolding it politely like a dinner table napkin and then tucked it away for the sake of a laugh, a thoughtful question. And then again, when the time was right, she would take her grief out again.

Miriam will always be a mother, even though she no longer has any living children. The impulse to love and to nurture is ingrained within her and it is impossible not to feel comforted in her presence. It is clear that the memory of her children bring her great joy even though the pain of their absence is always present with her.

The Blessed Mother Mary, too, lost a child. When she consented to bear her son, though she may not have fully known it, she agreed not only to bear the burden of a pregnancy which the world would view as shameful. She consented to the joy of raising a child. To the pain of losing Him, though He would rise again. To be “Blessed” by God does not mean that the road ahead is easy. It takes great courage to say “yes” to God’s will when it is not our own and when we do not know what lies ahead.

Elizabeth says, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Mary trusts in God. She trusts that all that the angel Gabriel told her will come true and that, whatever the cost, God “has done great things for me.”

As Christmas nears, I think of Mary’s joy and her pain. I think of the strength it takes to bend oneself beneath the yoke of a Great Blessing. To be a mother is an act of great bravery, especially in a world which does not see the burden you bear or the blessing you bring.

“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed,” Mary says. In this generation, we pray to her. We call her Blessed. As we speak these words, let us seek to know her strength, to realize what courage it took for her to say “yes” to God. In knowing her bravery, we are able to share fully in her joy. Amen.