

“A Companion for Prayer”

Introduction: Last week we saw how Luke began his gospel with the extraordinary experience of a priest named Zechariah. We saw how he encountered the divine while ministering in the temple, and then received silence, not as a punishment from God but a gift to help him ponder God’s wonderful promises, including becoming the father of the one who would prepare people for the coming of the Lord.

About half a year later, while Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, is still pregnant, something even more extraordinary happens to a young woman named Mary. Now I recognize that Mary can be a confusing figure. Some traditions hold her up as the role model of a good mother, while other traditions would encourage us to pray to her.

A 12thc. theologian named Bernard of Clairvaux once wrote, “If you fear the Father, go to the Son, if you fear the Son, go to his Mother.” Perhaps from this statement comes the fable of the Lord walking through the streets of heaven seeing a lot of people who had no business being there. So the Lord goes to the gates of heaven where St. Peter was sitting with his laptop, and demands to know what was going on. “Boss, it’s not my fault,” Peter exclaimed. “I didn’t let them in.” “Well, who did?” the Lord persists. “OK I’ll tell you, but you won’t like it,” Peter responds. “When I say to those people that they can’t come in, don’t they go around to the back door and your mother lets them in!”

Well, Mary’s role is certainly not to help us somehow avoid, or get around, her son. Rather, I think that, as we trace her life from the biblical record, where Mary can be most helpful to us is as a companion we can pray with. Let’s hear how her encounter (Annunciation, “announcement”) with the divine begins.

I. “You who are highly favored.”

A. Today, Nazareth, Mary’s hometown, is a bustling city, with homes and shops and churches and mosques all jammed next to one another, and small cars buzzing through the narrow streets at alarming speeds! Inside a large church called the Basilica of the Annunciation, built on the ruins of several older churches which date back to the fourth century, as well as, it is thought by some, the spot where Mary’s house was located, there are large, colorful depictions of Mary, donated by some two dozen nations, a testimony to the widespread appeal of the mother of Jesus. Despite the fact that Jesus lived in Nazareth for some thirty years and is frequently referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth,” Nazareth is definitely his mother’s town!

B. Back when Mary grew up there, the town was a mere backwater. It had only a few hundred residents who were not thought of very highly, and its insignificant status led a potential follower of Jesus, when he heard that Jesus had grown up there, to declare: “Nazareth, can anything good come from there?” (Jn. 1:46). So, when the angel Gabriel appeared there, bringing the word to Mary that she had been highly favored by God, well might Mary have wondered. “God’s favor rests with me?! Why on earth would that be?” She was a poor, young (probably teenage) girl, from a tiny town. What had she done to earn the favor of God? Nothing!

Illustration: It's one of the reasons I so appreciate the painting of the Annunciation by Henry Tanner, completed in 1898 and hanging now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I love that Tanner doesn't depict Mary as a holy woman, on her knees, with prayer book in her hand and halo around her head! Instead, he depicts Mary as half asleep, rumped, bare toes poking out from under her robe, and gazing at a shaft of brilliant light that leaves her wondering. He pictures her, in other words, more like us!

C. The point is, Mary wasn't favored by God due to any inherent merit or sinlessness on her part, but simply because of his grace. That she was blessed was because she said "yes" to God. She acted on God's word, trusting God's promise to her. However, as the text reveals, that didn't come quickly or easily! As we sift through her conversation with Gabriel, Mary wasn't really concerned about who her child would become, or what her child would do, as amazing and prophecy-fulfilling as that all was. Her concern was about *how* this son was going to come into being! Mary was engaged, but had had no relations with her fiancée, Joseph, nor did she intend to have such, until the marriage took place.

D. So, Mary was greatly troubled, at both the magnitude, and the impossibility, of what was being said to her. How will this be? Did God know how this would drastically alter her life, and what would people (including her fiancée) think as she started to show? The truth of the matter is that when God reaches out to us and invites us to get involved with his Son, it can be unsettling. We're called to take on a new set of allegiances. We're called away from self-sufficiency. We're called to new kinds of behavior. What enables you to trust in what God promises, and that God has your good in mind?

II. "How Will This Be?"

A. To this end, the angel pointed Mary to her relative Elizabeth. He seemed to be saying, "You wonder what God is able to do? You wonder about the goodness of God? Then just look at what God has already done." That's really a beautiful picture of a life of faith. We live with God in the present, by looking with hope to the future, secured by what God has done in the past. And while Mary in response said to Gabriel, after he explained the bit about the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, "OK, I'm good," it didn't stop her from racing off to Elizabeth's house to process all that was happening to her. She needed a confirming word from someone she trusted, someone who had experience in these divine matters.

B. Some have called this visit with Elizabeth the second annunciation. The first "announcement" was by God through the angelic being, Gabriel, while the second came through a human being, Elizabeth. This human affirmation is something we all need as we walk this life of faith and seek to discern God's call and presence in our lives. We need people in our lives who can help us to see, and who can affirm, how God seems to be moving in us. Affirmed by Elizabeth, Mary breaks out into song (1:46-55). We'll come back to that next week. At this point, I just want to notice with you that it may have taken many years for things to become clear to Mary while, as Luke puts it, she pondered the challenges she began to experience in her son (Lk. 2:19). In this sense, Mary becomes a companion who can help us pray as we go through our life of faith and the challenges we meet in it. What do I mean?

C. As the biblical writers record her life, it is bookended by the activity of the Holy Spirit. It begins with the Spirit's descent, bringing about the conception of Jesus, and ends with Mary being among those who experience the descent of that same Spirit at Pentecost (Ac. 1:14). In between, she faces a whole host of challenges, and she wonders:

- She wonders about the prophetic words spoken by an elder named Simeon who, at the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple, took Jesus in his arms and declared him to be the means of salvation for all nations, but that in the process, a sword would pierce his mother's heart.
- She wonders, worriedly, where he is when he fails to be found among the group returning from the family Passover celebration in Jerusalem.
- She wonders how, as a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus had decided to stay back and engage with the religious leaders there.
- She wonders what on earth was happening to her son when he disappeared as a young man for 40 days into the wilderness.
- She wonders why he incurred the wrath of the citizens of his hometown, Nazareth, after preaching in their synagogue upon his return.
- She wonders why he at first refused to take care of a shortage of wine at a wedding they attended.
- She wonders why the religious establishment thought he was out of his mind.
- She wonders at his new definition of his family, as those who do God's will.
- She wonders and wonders and wonders as she stood near his cross, watching him suffer, the sword doing its final piercing of her mother's soul.
- She wonders at the news of his resurrection.
- She wonders at the possibility of his return.

Mary's role, then, is not to help us somehow get around her son, or even to replace him, but to help us wonder. With her cry, "How will this be?" she opens herself to God's inscrutable ways and invites us to come alongside and journey with her as she faces her challenges, asks her questions, and experiences both sorrow and joy.

Let us go to the cross and stand with Mary as we remember what Jesus came to do there.