

God said I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

If there are Biblical narratives that we know almost as well as the story we will tell here Thursday night and Friday morning, it would probably be the two we hear today. The story of the conceptions of Elizabeth and Mary are not just familiar to us because we heard them Wednesday night or that we hear them every year, but because they are echoes of others stories that we know. How could we possibly hear the story of Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age without thinking back to Sara and Abraham? Many of you may also remember that a few weeks ago we heard the story of another woman who could not bear a child. Her name was Hannah and despite the odds, she too became pregnant and had Samuel. After her conception, Hannah would sing a song just like Mary does today, and it is all but impossible to hear either Mary or Hannah's song

without thinking of the other.

In the book of Exodus, we will hear another tale of a woman who gets pregnant, even though a decree has been put out to kill every Hebrew male baby. She has become convinced that somehow her child is going to be protected. That child is born and is immediately hidden away in the bushes of the Nile River, and the rest, as they say is history. When we hear the other story of Mary's conception, the one in the Gospel of Matthew, we cannot help but be reminded of the story in Exodus.

So even if we had no idea what was going to happen this week, we would know that today's events are precursors of something monumental. We know that for two reasons. First, both of these pregnancies break the laws of nature as we understand them. They are literally... impossible. Second, we have a Biblical history of such events happening in the past. The first time it happened, the result was not only the birth of a child, but the birth of two of the world's major religions, Islam and Judaism. Another time, a closed womb will be opened and bear a boy that will be the last Hebrew hero of the era before the kings. He will also be one of the greatest prophets the world has ever known. Finally, the birth and protection of the child Moses will result in the greatest leader in Jewish history, leading the people to hope and freedom.

The inescapable message that Luke is giving us today is that these two pregnancies are going to cause another cataclysmic change as extraordinary as the birth of Isaac, of Samuel and of Moses.

From Sara to Mary, our sacred text is laced with narratives about miraculous births leading to giant leaps in our faith. We find very similar stories in the Roman

culture of antiquity as ways to explain the greatness of Caesars or other leaders. We can also read the same type of conception narratives from the sacred texts of other religions. But this morning, rather than talk about how similar all these tales are, I would like to concentrate on the difference among them.

In all of the stories in the Hebrew Bible that I mentioned, as well as today's tale of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and the narratives I have read from other religion traditions, all of the women are people who cannot or should not have children. In the case of Moses' natural mother, she should not have been pregnant, because her baby was going to be killed. In the other cases, the women were either barren or too old to conceive. The exception to all of these cases is Mary. Unlike the other women, she is very young and presumably very fertile.

Second, all of the other women that we have talked about seem to have been influential members of society, or at least as influential as possible for a woman to be in a patriarchal society. Sara and Abraham were well to do. Hannah came from an prestigious family. Elizabeth is married to a high priest. But Mary, Mary seems to be a nobody. Not only is she extremely young, our best guess is about 14, but she has no social pedigree whatsoever. In addition, she is from a backwater town that is apparently the butt of many jokes in the big city.

Finally, all of the previous events described were single pregnancies. Why, this time, do we have two at once?

Starting with the last point first, we might presume that the double pregnancy was meant by Luke to telegraph to us that this event is twice as important as the other similar

narratives that precede it. That very well may be the case. But this morning, I would like to suggest to you that there is another reason for this. It occurs to me that while the act of conception is obviously a joint venture, the process of being pregnant may be one of the most individual experiences any human can undergo. But as we have talked about often here at St. David's, it seems that God never does things alone. The very essence of God, as we understand it, is a being that works in rhythm with the other forms of itself. That is why we refer to three persons in one God, noting that God's very essence is in community. It seems to me that this is what is going on today. How else could the greatest revelation of God into human history happen except by being received and heard in community? How else could God's very essence become part of Mary and part of us without it being shared by two women together? It is how each of us experiences God in our own lives too, in and through each other, commiserating with and caring for one another, just as Elizabeth and Mary do today.

Regarding the other two differences between Mary and all those who came before, why would God not want an experienced woman to be the mother of Jesus and why not someone that people knew and respected? The commonalities in these stories suggest how Jesus is similar to Isaac, Samuel and Moses. But this difference points out to us that in another way Jesus will be radically unlike the leaders who came before. In that reading I began with from Genesis, we hear that kings of people will come from Sara's conception. But Jesus will be different and we don't have to wait for him to be born and mature to find out how he is different. Mary tells us in that song we have come to call the Magnificat. She in fact, prophesizes what is to come. "He has brought down

the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

What Mary will bring into the world is like the others who have come before in that his impact will be monumental. But unlike all of them, Jesus will not be an earthly king or a top down ruler. The reason the mold is broken today is that Jesus will lead from the bottom. The only person who could bear this new form of leader into the world would be a very poor, very unknown, inexperienced, backwater girl.

I think we have done ourselves a great disservice over the years, developing an image of Mary as a quiet, pious, demure, submissive, mature, well dressed woman. Such views of her have drifted us from the power of the Annunciation and caused us to misunderstand the radicality of her message to us. The standard model for conceiving a world changer was broken for a reason. Mary was apparently not any of those things. She was very inexperienced, very poor, oppressed, with no power and no social status at all. She would bear this child in obscurity, just like so many teenage mothers did before and since. But as she tells us, this birth will be different. A leader will emerge from the depths of her poverty and despair to bring hope to everyone like her. The Magnificat also tells us something else about Mary. She could not have been demure or quiet. She absolutely would never fit the mold of a subservient wife as she is cast in some circles. Her words today are as radical and revolutionary as any that anyone has ever spoken. If we have any doubt of how earth shaking Mary was, let us remember that in the 1980's, the government of Guatemala banned her words, those words we just heard today, considering the Magnificat to be too subversive and too dangerous to those

in power. Their concern was that Mary's song would cause the people to riot.

As a child growing up in the Roman Catholic church, Mary was held out as our example of how to live. She was our model of what we were supposed to do with our lives. Only somehow, this radical prophet who suggested that the world needed to be turned upside down, the girl who stood her ground even as a teenager in the face of terrible oppression at the hands of a domineering empire, was turned into a wallflower. Historically, Protestants have disassociated themselves with Mary, seeing any veneration of her as "popish." Both of these approaches are in my mind unhelpful for us in our pursuit of the realm of God. Setting Mary aside is a gigantic loss. But modeling the image of Mary that was constructed by the church is perhaps even more damaging. Both approaches mask who Jesus was and take us down a very different understanding of Christianity. Instead, let us model the real Mary, the graceful woman who saw the inequities of the world and did all in her power to change them. Let us model the woman who fearlessly gave us the Magnificat, even though she knew that such talk was sedition and grounds for government officials to kill her. Let us model the woman who will teach her son these same important lessons, the one who will take his mother's words and say to us, Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and you who weep now."

As we spend the last few days preparing ourselves for the one who will bring us the Beatitudes and an entire new way of living, let us honor the one who will bear him into the world. Let Mary be our model for how to live our daily life. Through her, may each of us realize that the way we experience God in our lives is in and through each other, by being in community with one another. May we have the courage to sing the

Magnificat to a world that is unfair and oppressive. May we too be radical prophets not afraid to show the world the ways things could be and what will happen if we do not change them. Let us follow her lead in raising our own children. Let us take our strength in the knowledge that while Mary had no money, no voice and no place in society, she changed everything anyway. That means that no matter your background, no matter your station in the world, you and I can do it too.

Finally, perhaps it is the Orthodox church's title for Mary that is most revelatory for us this morning. They call her Theotokos, the God bearer. All of what we hear today is so impossible, but it is the truest thing that we know. The same holds true for all of us. If you can model Mary the prophet, it is not just she who will be Theotokos. It will also be you. You are the one who will bear Jesus to a world in desperate need of him. You will be the God bearer, the one who makes Christmas a reality. Are you ready to be Theotokos? Can you allow God to be born in you? The world is waiting. Amen.