

Esther's Story
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
December 24, 2023
Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'* ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'* ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. AMEN

I remember it well, walking to the well that morning, looking forward to some time with Mary, but she was not there. I later discovered that she left our little town before dawn. We were 14 at the time, and she was promised to Joseph, that good man, a carpenter.

Early each morning from the time we were small, Mary and I would meet and talk and laugh around that well. She had a beautiful laugh, and a smile that could set the stars on fire. She was just alive with curiosity, possibility, joy, or just an inner light. She was and is my dearest friend.

We met as small children, when our mothers gathered together, sharing their stories, their worries and joys. Though named after the brave Queen Esther, I was the timid one, always hanging on to my mother's robes, nearly tripping her. She would say, "Esther, go play, it will be okay, I'll watch over you."

One day Mary approached me with such gentleness, even for a child, and held out her hand. I couldn't resist being around her. We were inseparable from that time on, that is whenever we were not needed at home or in the fields. And Mary always led the way.

It was a good childhood in Nazareth, a small village on occupied land. Though far from the city, word of Roman soldiers reached us, and fear was never far off. Our families were large, and poor, but we got by, often supper was sparse with so many mouths to feed, but God provided. I had six brothers, so Mary was like a sister to me. We learned to read together so that we could retell the details in the stories of our ancestors Moses and Deborah, of Elijah and Miriam, and of course, Esther! We grew into young women together and wondered about that time when we would wed and become mothers. Mary was betrothed first, of course, and I looked to her as a guide.

It wasn't like Mary to miss a morning at the well, and her mother said nothing but that she had gone to visit her cousin Elizabeth. It troubled me. If a trip had been planned, surely Mary would have told me, we shared everything! And she didn't return the following week or the week after, but three months hence, at which point it was very clear that something had happened. Mary was with child.

Now I am not ignorant to the ways of life. I have known how babies are created from the time I was young. But Mary? Had she been deceiving me? We talked so much about her upcoming marriage, and I was sure that she had not known Joseph in that way.

I was scared, intimidated to even approach my friend. I feared for her life, pregnant without a husband could have her stoned. Mary was herself, of course, yet she seemed different. More grown-up, more grounded. Something had happened to her. But didn't she understand the consequences of this pregnancy?

It was hard to find time to talk with her alone, there were always people around, chores to do, and Mary was shunned by the women in the town, so it wasn't easy to get time with her. She spent much of her time inside.

But one night we both snuck out after the sun set. We had to be quiet, it was dangerous after all. Two young women, alone at night, no husbands, no children, nothing to protect us, we were most vulnerable, but we had to talk. I needed to know how my dear friend was feeling.

We met beyond the center of the village and Mary told me the most extraordinary story. Months earlier, as she went to the well late in the day when the sun had started to set, she found it empty.

Esther, she said, "I used to love going there at dusk, it was so peaceful. I could think of the big things of life, marriage, God, my family. But this one night, as I looked into the water, I saw the reflection of an angel. I

slowly looked into his face. He was enormous and fierce and frightening, and for a moment I just froze. My eyes got large, and he said, “Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you.

And so, I ran! I ran as fast as I could back to my house, I was terrified. When I got there, I sat, and breathing hard, I wondered what that big, fiery messenger really meant. Favored one? I’m 14, a girl not yet married, without money, without prospects, in a rural town. I was going to be Joseph’s wife, but not yet. What favor is in that? Men, priests, and the rich are favored, not me.

I had so many questions, so many concerns. Why this interruption? Why now? My life was planned out and I knew what would come next, marriage, the carpentry shop, babies, God willing. And then, this angel.

Again, the angel told me not to be afraid. I prayed the only prayer I could think of, ‘O God, O God, O God, still my heart,’ and I was finally able to breathe again.

And that angel, oh Esther, could it have been Gabriel, the one we hear about in the story of Daniel? He said that God had a surprise for me, that I was going to have a baby, a son, who would be great, and would be a leader of our people. The angel even told me the baby’s name, Jesus, a name that means that God saves.”

I had to interrupt her, “Did he hurt you, Mary? Did he force you? Mary... tell me.”

“No,” she replied, “he was gentle and surprisingly kind. It was my choice and I wondered how, if the angel is speaking for God, how I could possibly have a baby and do this thing alone? Would Joseph be the father somehow? Or, if not, would I be scorned, rejected by the townspeople, forced to stay hidden as though I did something wrong?

Would I need to die for this child? So, I asked him, truthfully, how I could possibly do this alone?

And Esther, he listened to me. Could it be that God is listening, too? He said that my cousin Elizabeth is pregnant, ha, ha! Just like our ancestor Sarah in her old age! How could that be?"

"All things are possible with God," the angel said.

And Mary left the next day to visit her cousin Elizabeth without telling anyone about the angel.

After being with her and recognizing the miracle growing within Elizabeth, Mary sang for joy of all that her son would do for the world. She told me that her boy, her Jesus, would save us, would change things for those who suffered greatly, would dismantle oppressive powers, and break down hatred, and that he would be called God's own child. She said that in Jesus, "God has brought down the powerful ones from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things. It's exactly what God promised, beginning with Abraham right up until now."

Mary loved Jesus from the moment she first learned of him. But I can tell you that for Mary, it wasn't easy carrying Jesus or being his mother, despite her deep faith, her loving spirit. I watched her, late in her pregnancy, rejected by most of her friends, but supported by Joseph and me, of course. My heart broke for her as we harvested crops, sweat pouring from her brow, or her back swayed as she carried water from the well.

Through the years, Mary has shone like the sun. In our world, our dignity comes from being a wife and mother, but Mary is different. She is revered among us not because she was Joseph's wife or carried this extraordinary child in her womb. Not because she was and is my very

best friend, but because she said yes to God. Yes, when it would have been easier to say no, yes to the pain and the worry that came with the job of raising Jesus. I remember her sorrow and strength as she witnessed Jesus being executed and then the wonder of learning that he was again alive.

Mary believed and still believes that in God, all things are possible.

We have known joy in our lives, and we have known sorrow. These days, we await the return of the Christ, our Jesus, as promised, and until that day of restoration comes to be, we will hold fast to God and one another, trusting that God is with us no matter what.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN