

**“I Will Walk Among You”**

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Both Elizabeth and Mary had special far-reaching pregnancies, and Elizabeth was beyond child bearing age. Just like Sarah, Hannah and other women from the Old Testament who struggled; barrenness was a theme that ran through the Scripture of the Old Testament. Her [Elizabeth's] conception was a radically defining Divine action.

Now Mary, too, was blessed in another Divine way. Mary was described to have had some sort of Immaculate Conception and, moreover, Mary was carrying the Messiah, the son of God. The day that the two women came together - as described so beautifully in that passage you read - was a day which was an incredibly holy, spiritual moment. But it was also very normal: Two women getting together; to share the joy of their pregnancies.

When we lived in northern Wisconsin we had real good friends named Tom and Candy. Tom and Candy had their daughter, Deanna, ten months before we had our Hannah. We got to really share what having a child would be like, watching them doing it just ahead of us.

It was so meaningful to see their worries. I got to see Tom worried about what he was going to do. Tom was a tough guy with big hands. He worked with his hands all day. Then he was trying to hold this little thing in his hands. I was even more worried. Frankly I always shake a little bit, so I thought maybe this baby wouldn't even make it to year one.

Then, one night we were babysitting for Tom and Candy, and we had just found out that Jill was pregnant. Deanna was not very big. I took her into our den, and I am lying in the La-Z-boy watching television, with Deanna on my chest. Most all of you - whether you have been a babysitter or a parent - know that joyous feeling of their heart up against you.

At that moment, and I have shared before, I wasn't real keen on the whole “dad thing” when we started the process. But, “wow,” it was at that moment that I thought I just might not be able to do the “dad thing,” but I *wanted to* in a meaningful, real way. That special moment that was given to me by a tiny, little baby, helped me realize that I wanted the call that God had given us to be parents.

I know many of you who have felt those moments as well; sitting down with friends, kind of going through that process together: What are you doing right? What is going wrong? How come she never stops crying? Will she go to college - still getting up twice every night? Are we going to be taking her to 7<sup>th</sup> grade in diapers? You know all of those little worries you have when they are little. You work it out.

I bet every one of you who are parents have known someone else going through it at about the same time, and you have talked to them, or you had your parents or your in-laws there to answer your questions, tease you a little bit; just have fun.

In part, that's the “normal” part of what Elizabeth and Mary were going through. They were going through their pregnancy at the same time from very different places - one of advanced age and one who was young. But they were sharing the joy of the moment. In that

moment something *powerful* took place that was truly life changing: these two marginalized pregnant women carried the future of the Messiah. When I say marginalized, [I mean] a.) They were simply marginalized because they were women, and women were just above slaves in that society. Men had the control - total control - over them. But they [the women] were also marginalized because they lived in the most back-water place imaginable in the ancient world. And, neither one of them had a normal life: to be barren, like Elizabeth, her whole life. The only value a woman had was in the number of children she had and Elizabeth had none: she was a woman of no value. In fact, in that day and age, a man could even divorce his wife simply because *she* couldn't give him a child. Yet, Zechariah stood by her and God blessed her in that way that was so important for that time.

Mary, on the opposite end, did not have a normal life either. Mary struggled with the opposite issue - she had her child too young, and before the marriage was complete, even consummated. Now there is always confusion when you read this passage, because you think, "Wait a moment. Were Joseph and Mary just kind of inappropriately together on that road from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Because, on one hand they were committed to each other and, on the other hand, they were not married to each other yet? What was going on?"

In that society you were brought together for about a year; it would be about like the equivalent of being engaged. But the difference is, that that engagement period of time - while you were legally bound to each other - when you were engaged, you were legally bound for the rest of your life. The only way to break an engagement in that day was a divorce. That's how close they were, even though they had not consummated the marriage. They were not allowed to and, according to the Bible, they had to go down in this awkward period of time, in that year, for the census. That is why they were together and, yet, they were still not husband and wife, in that sense.

I cannot imagine the fear Mary had, to be pregnant without Joseph - and yet what a gift Joseph was in that moment. Some of the most meaningful calls in life from God are the most painful.

I love my Wednesday night Lectionary Study Group. They have taught me infinitely more than I have ever been able to teach them, and they have given you more sermons than I have. Two people in the class are Joe and Renae Jones. They have given me permission to tell you about their response to this passage. We are talking about two women who are pregnant amidst struggle and frustration, and out of that pain comes something truly marvelous for both women.

For Joe and Renae, the passage resonated for them in a different way. Why it resonated with them was because, they both knew the pain of infertility. They could resonate with Elizabeth's life: the longing and the desire for family. Joe and Renae knew the pain of waiting and longing without an answer. But, out of something difficult came something truly wonderful, because they went to China, first, and got Carly. Then went back and received Ty. Now, out of the most difficult experience of not having what they wanted, God blessed them in an even more powerful and meaningful way, God gave them the gift of two children who they love more than life itself. Out of that painful moment, God gave them even better results.

The same thing happens in the life of Scripture and the many stories of individuals. And, the same is true for each one of us. Often what we want we do not get, the way we want it. But, over and over again, we get what God wants us to have and, many times, it is even better than what we thought we wanted.

Initially Elizabeth would not have chosen the long, circuitous route to motherhood; but she would, once again, understand what an extraordinary role she played in human and divine history. It hurt a long time, but I bet, after she received her pregnancy and saw what an impact it made on the world, she would choose to do it all over again.

The same thing with Mary; Mary's life - from the tiniest moment of her life as a preteen or early teen - having that child - all the way up to watching her child, and I don't care how old your children get, they are still *your* children - *your* little boys and girls. To see her little boy hanging on that cross, and her standing at its foot, is unimaginable for any mother or father. That is the suffering life that Mary led; and yet, in this passage, that the little girl read so beautifully a few minutes ago, she shared the Magnificat: Mary singing praise to God for being the vessel that would carry the son of God. As painful as her life was, she would do it again, because her life had meaning - it was greater than just herself: it transformed the world.

So, in times when things seem unbearable, or random, or hurtful, we turn to God to find meaning; and, even in those moments, we hold fast to the examples of Elizabeth and Mary, who fulfilled the book of Revelation, and in believing and proving that God can make all things new.

As people of faith, we live our lives trusting in God's ability to take whatever present struggle we are in - whether it's a pregnancy issue or anything else - and God will make all things new. That is more than a promise. It is happening through the power of the Holy Spirit, moving in your life and mine - right now - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.