

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Twenty-seven years ago I can remember hearing Mary's story with a new perspective since I was pregnant for the first time and would give birth to our son the next February. Pregnancy is an amazing experience and my guess is that most of the women here today who have ever had a baby feel some connection to Mary.

Whether you were surprised by your first pregnancy, like Mary, or it was carefully planned and prayed for, carrying a child in your body is an amazing and difficult and wondrous and uncomfortable thing.

But if you are a man, or a child, or a woman who has not yet had this experience or one who has longed for a child and were never able to carry one of your own, Mary's story may be more difficult to relate to. It might even be painful to hear that a young girl who wasn't even thinking about becoming a mother received this gift out of the blue.

The fact that God came into the world as a human baby is as important to this event as the fact that God chose a lowly teenager to serve as mother. The fact that God chose Mary at all says more about God than it does about her. And this choice can help us see how Mary's experience can be ours, too, no matter our gender or physical capabilities.

We use the word pregnant most often with the birthing of a human being or a mammal of some sort. This word also means to be filled with possibility and potential. It speaks of a time that is used to prepare for something new.

Each of us has given birth to something at some time or other in our lives. God created us in God's own image, and God is first and foremost a creator. In that image we are creative beings. We are gifted with brains and bodies that lead us to particular interests like music or mechanics, athletics or art, exploring or teaching. Our gifts and interests lead us to give birth to new ideas, inventions, and strategies.

But even as we develop the skills and talents God has wired in us, there are times when we feel entirely unqualified and unprepared for what God is calling us to do.

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God her first response was to ask how in the world that could be. That was as much a question of physical possibility as a theological one. And Gabriel answers both.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you."

We all wonder from time to time how we are going to face a difficult thing before us. We have questions to answer, puzzles to solve, and people to face that we think we are not equipped to handle. When we come to a time when we think, "How can this be? I'm not

ready, I'm not able," it is then that we remember that the Holy Spirit has come upon us, too, at the time of our baptism.

In whatever challenges we face, the Holy Spirit is the power of the Most High who lives and moves within us. Remember, the fact that God chose Mary says more about God than it says about Mary.

God did not choose a mature woman who had proven she could carry healthy babies. God chose a young woman who God would form into a capable mother.

God did not choose a wealthy family who could easily provide for the Son of God. God chose a couple who had to work hard and would need to rely on God throughout their lives.

God did not choose people who had power or influence in their community. Mary and Joseph were given God's blessing by God's grace and favor, not because of anything they had done or said or accomplished.

These are the promises we have, too. When we think, "How can this be? I'm not ready. I'm not able," we are reminded that the Holy Spirit has come upon us; the power of the Most High lives within each of us. You are holy and God's beloved child and God will give you what you need—inspiration, determination, and even the faith that God is with you.

The angel then gave Mary a precious gift—a companion, Elizabeth, who was also experiencing a most unexpected pregnancy at an old age. She would be Mary's mentor to accompany her as she learned and prepared and grew into this new role God had given her.

This is why we gather together in congregations like this. We are here to accompany one another in our journeys of faith. We are here to learn from one another, to be God's instruments of inspiration and encouragement and faith for one another.

When I was a young woman, before I had children, I had a conversation with an older woman who had received a terminal diagnosis. Myra was a beautiful woman of faith, in every way. We talked about what it was like to know that she would die soon.

And she said something like this: "I never gave birth to children but this time of waiting to die feels like a pregnancy for me. It is a time of joyful anticipation of what is to come. Things will not be the same again. A new life is waiting for me and I am so excited!"

May we learn to hear and recognize God's callings to us. And may we embrace them with joyful anticipation as the Holy Spirit lives and moves within us, making us new by the grace and the gift of Jesus Christ, the light and life of God with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen