

“Once a Mother, Always a Mother”
March 8, 2020

John 19:25-27

Most of the time, in order to understand the ending of a story, you have to go all the way back to the beginning of the story. That’s what I’ve been doing in my own heart and mind over these last few chaotic days and all through the morning, and now you are welcome to join me...

It all started when I was a teenager. Back then I was still learning, still growing, still trying to understand my own identity and still trying to figure out my place in the world. Until the day the angel appeared and threw my life off course.

Gabriel was the angel’s name. And he came to me out of the blue one day and told me I, Mary, was going to give birth to a child. That stunning piece of news threw me into a panic. Gabriel proceeded to tell me that the child growing in my womb was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. And my panic turned quickly into confusion. I remember staring blankly at Gabriel. What do you mean when you say my child is “of the Holy Spirit?”

Then Gabriel tried to reassure me. “With God, nothing is impossible,” he said as calmly as he could. Well that didn’t really work. And soon thereafter, Gabriel disappeared, which wasn’t particularly comforting either.

So there I was, feeling as alone and terrified as I can remember in my lifetime. Facing an unplanned pregnancy and the stigma that went with it. Not having any idea how my fiancé, Joseph, would react to the news. Totally unprepared for the changes in my body which would be brought on by carrying a child. And totally unprepared for motherhood awaiting me nine months away.

Not to mention the fact that Gabriel informed me the child I would be bearing was no ordinary child. If I wasn’t feeling the literal and figurative weight of the pregnancy already, the idea that my child was somehow chosen by God felt like a huge burden...

Looking back, I suppose the beginning of the story turned out as well as I could have hoped. My soon to be husband, Joseph, moved past his initial suspicion and we were married. My cousin, Elizabeth, was a great source of wisdom and support as I carried my pregnancy to term. Even though I never saw Gabriel again, I did feel a growing sense of peace and calm as I waited to give birth. Maybe that was the result of the Holy Spirit Gabriel spoke about.

But make no mistake. As I reflect on those life changing months in my life, the story of my son, Jesus, is a story that feels uniquely my own. Ask any woman who has carried and given birth to a child and she will tell you. The tale you have heard about baby Jesus over the years included God and Joseph and shepherds and stable animals and

angels and King Herod and all these different people. Yet only one of us carried this holy child for nine months. Only one of us shared our womb with him. And only one of us went through the fatigue and the morning sickness and the sleep deprivation before giving birth to him. In a miserable stable, no less.

I am the only one who has been with Jesus from the very beginning all the way to the bitter end. From his birth in a manger all the way to his death on a cross...

After I brought Jesus into the world, I began to get a sense of how special my son was. Maybe it was those three kings who showed up with gold, frankincense and myrrh to give to my baby. Not the most practical gifts you could give to a young, first time mother struggling to take care of an infant, but I guess the thought counts for something.

There were plenty of other signs and signals related to my son as he grew older. When Jesus was twelve I remember vividly the day that we lost track of his whereabouts and Joseph and I were running around like two crazy people looking for our son. Every parent's worst nightmare...

For three whole days we looked for Jesus, asking friends, relatives, anyone we knew if they could help us locate our son. And then at the end of the third day we found Jesus sitting among the priests in the temple. He may have been glad to see us, but I couldn't really tell by his expression.

I threw up my hands in exasperation and incredible relief and I asked Jesus, "your father and I have been searching everywhere for you." Without hesitating, Jesus responded, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

When I repeat those words in my head, they sound sarcastic...a child too big for his britches. But the tone in his voice that day was so genuine and so matter-of-fact I couldn't really stay mad at him. Whoever described parenting as learning how to give up control over our children's lives understands what I'm talking about. With Jesus during his growing up years, I came to those realizations more than a few times.

By the time Jesus grew into adulthood, I didn't see him quite as often as I would have liked. He did a lot of traveling with his friends around the Galilean countryside. And when large crowds of people started to constantly seek him out, Jesus and I had to make a special effort to see each other.

Yet whether I saw Jesus face to face or looked at him from afar, my sense of pride in my son's accomplishments never faded. When Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, it was the first time I understood my son's identity. He was God's son as much as he was my own son. To this day, I'm convinced I believed in my son before any of the twelve disciples.

There was another day when I went with my other children to visit Jesus, and someone informed him that we were there to see him. As soon as Jesus found out, he sent word back through the messenger, “those who do the will of God are my true brothers, sisters and mother.” Children teach their parents over the course of our lives and Jesus was no different. Jesus was all about family, but his definition of family was bigger and broader than the one I had always known. The people who trust God and do what God wants them to do in the world...they are as much a part of your family as the ones who are born into your family...

Well today it's Friday. The sky overhead is dull and bleak and gray, inching closer to black. I haven't seen my son Jesus for a short while, but earlier in the day I could sense something was wrong. Mother's intuition. The city of Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims coming from near and far to celebrate the feast of the Passover. However, something told me I needed to put my eyes on my child.

I just wish I didn't have to see Jesus like this. As I stand at the foot of the cross with my sister, and Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, I cannot take my eyes off of him. The crown of thorns on his head. His arms outstretched. The whip marks across his back. A dusty cloth around his waist with his feet nailed to the wood.

He labors to catch his breath so much I can hear him inhale and exhale. As a mother I try to formulate a plan...some way to take away my son's agony. But the nearby Roman soldiers are watching us carefully. To them, this is just another execution.

All those memories I've recounted for you come flooding back as I stand there. How much I've grown since my teenage years. Holding Jesus in my arms in those sacred moments right after he was born. Studying the faces of those priests in the temple amazed at my child's precociousness. Toasting with Jesus over a glass of new wine at the Cana wedding. Trying to explain to my other children why Jesus wasn't around very often...

At that moment, Jesus gazes toward the heavens and cries out in desperation to God. It's a sound I've never heard my son make. My stomach churns and tears stream down my face and part of me wishes I could pull him down off the cross and hold him in my arms. And the other part of me wishes mercifully that the end will come quickly.

And then Jesus looks down at me and the disciple Jesus loved the best, who happened to be standing by my side. “Woman, here is your son,” he mumbled in a voice barely audible. “And here is your mother.”

All those years of taking care of my son, raising him to be a good man and trusting God to teach him the rest. And here, in that poignant, dark, bitter, horrible instant when my son could hardly breathe on a wooden cross, he was taking care of his mother. Making sure I would never be alone from that day forward...

I have been there for my son from the very beginning. And today I'm reminded of one thing I've always known. My son will be there for me from this day forward... Amen.