

Hardship and doubts. I am sure that we all have had periods of both hardship and doubts. It seems that such are a major way of life. Yet the two do not always go together. Sometimes hardship results in more and more doubt; other times it seems that hardship chases away doubts, even gives rise to a renewed level of confidence.

Years ago I was stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado. One winter my tank company was conducting maneuvers in bitter cold weather. We had a mess team cooking breakfast for us; outside. I got my eggs and bacon hot off the grill and went about twenty feet to sit on a fallen tree stump that wasn't covered with snow. By the time I got there both the eggs and the bacon were frozen solid. Hardship, yes. But morale in my unit was at a high point. In spite of the cold, in spite of the challenges to stay warm, in spite of the challenges to keep tanks working in that weather, the soldiers were pumped. They knew that they could still accomplish their mission even under the worse circumstances.

A few months later, still at Fort Carson, I became the battalion operations officer. Not far from that winter event, in the warmth of summer, the unit was being evaluated for its readiness. Trying to be stay hidden as I moved along the washes in the simulated battle, under the stress, I managed to get lost. Totally lost. In an area that I had been in many times before. I wondered what I was doing; whether I had what it takes to be a leader.

Hardship and doubts.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, faced incredible hardship. First and most obviously, she was a woman in a male dominated society. She had a common name, meaning rebellion, she came from a small village, and had no chance of rebelling against her supporting role in her future husband's life. Even worse, she was now pregnant. And not yet married. Hardship started to look like the end of life for she could be stoned to death due to her pregnancy.

Yet Mary had been visited by an angel. The angel had forewarned her that she would become pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. The child within her would be called holy, the Son of God. And Mary believed. When she went to visit Elizabeth, Mary broke out in a song, a song known as the Magnificat.

But I am getting ahead of myself. There is this strange word 'blessed' that runs throughout the story of Mary. When Mary describes herself as blessed, the word is *makarizō* which means to pronounce happy or fortunate. Yes, Mary considered herself to be fortunate in that God had selected her to be the mother of Jesus. When Gabriel finished telling her what would happen, her reply was:

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. (v 38)". Truly an amazing statement! As much as Mary portrayed herself as a simple, humble peasant girl, she clearly knew of the prophecies concerning the Messiah; she clearly had faith enough to recognize an angel as a messenger from God; she clearly had faith to accept that this birth would in fact occur exactly as God had stated.

But happy? Happy? How could she look forward to the months to come, to the social stigma, to the accusations of sin, of potentially fatal human responses and be happy?

Well, she had had some time to think about what all this meant, what the angel had declared, as she traveled to visit Elizabeth.

Perhaps she was happy when she heard Elizabeth greet her, saying: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (vs 42-43). Here blessed is eulogeō: to speak well of, to bless, or to ascribe praise. Elizabeth was definitely speaking well of Mary. I think most everyone speaks well of a pregnant woman; wishes for the best for her and her child.

And then in verse 45 Elizabeth states: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." The word for blessed reverts to makarios which might be understood, in this unique context, to refer to someone who has received divine favor. There is ambiguity as to whether Elizabeth considered Mary to be blessed because God had selected her or more likely because she has believed what God has said.

Regardless, it is clear that Mary did not doubt. Moreover, she faced hardship with great joy; faced hardship with great joy because of her faith in the promises of God. Mary started to sing. Her song is called the Magnificat based on the first words of it in Latin. Listen again to those words: (46-49):

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

All generations will call her fortunate or happy. Not because of what she has done but because

God has chosen her. Well, she has done something: she has believed God! Listen to this next verse of her song:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

Did you note that all of the verbs were in the past tense? Mary is describing what the unborn Jesus will do as if it has already happened. This is faith! Mary knew what the Messiah was foretold to do and she considered it a done deed, an accomplished fact, even before he was born.

Do we consider the words of God throughout Scripture as being as good as accomplished? Or are we more like Zechariah, and Abraham, as wanting proof?

In some cultures Mary's song has been banned. From British India to modern Argentina, authorities considered it to be dangerous, too full of hope for the oppressed, hope that might spark uprising and rebellion.

But “too much hope” is precisely what we’re called to cultivate and proclaim in Advent. The Messiah is almost here, Mary tells us, and the promise of his lasting reign changes everything. There is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership structure that God will not upend. No promise God will fail to keep. No broken, exploited life God will not save. So let us find our voices and each sing their song — and share it with the world. How is God magnified through your unique perspective and vision? What words have you found to express the radical, revolutionary hope of the Messiah we await? What does your *Magnificat* sound like?

John the Baptist also faced hardship. He was in prison. He had pointed ahead to the one who was to come, to the Messiah. He had seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at the River Jordan. All that John had been sent to proclaim had happened. But now, he doubted. As he sat in a prison cell because of his faith and proclamations, he doubted. Was Jesus really the one? Was Jesus truly the Messiah? And so he sent some of his followers to question Jesus: "Are you the One?"

Using prophetic words from what we call the Old Testament note how Jesus answered:

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

All of these were what the Messiah was expected to do. These were the things, full of hope, that Mary would have expected Jesus to do. Yet John still wondered, still doubted.

After his reply to John, Jesus asked a question for the crowd concerning John, and it was asked three times in different forms: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?”; “What then did you go out to see?”; and again, “What then did you go out to see?” This question challenges the crowd to reexamine what they’re doing and why. It’s a good question for us: “What do we go to church to see?” “What do we expect to happen in our relationship with God?” Jesus then affirms John as a prophet; putting his doubts to rest. Jesus continues to put our doubts at rest as we encounter him.

Mary was blessed. She chose to be happy, to consider herself fortunate, to be honored to have been chosen by God. We also have the choice to be happy, to consider ourselves fortunate for we also have been chosen by God. For it is through the son that Mary gave birth to, Jesus the Christ, that God has once again affirmed that there is hope and salvation for all who believe.

Abraham, through whom all peoples were to be blessed wanted a sign. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, wanted a sign. John himself wanted assurance that Jesus was the Messiah. Doubt runs throughout the story of God's people.

Whether we have doubts or not during this Advent, let Mary's Magnificat remind us that we too are called to follow Jesus in lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, proclaiming hope and saying to God every day, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (v. 37).