

God Announces the Way. The Faith that Formed Jesus (Retreat part 14)

When we look at a friend's photo album, some of the most intriguing pictures are the ones of our friend's grandparents and parents. We stare into those faces not only to look for some resemblance but also to discern something of the character, the traits, the personality of our friend.

This week, we will use the first chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in pursuit of our growing desire to know Jesus more completely, that we might grow in love with him more intimately, because we want to follow him more freely.

Our method this week will be to stare into the faces of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, and look for what they tell us about our friend Jesus. We will try to enter into these scenes in the midst of our busy, everyday lives. We will try to learn about the character and personality of Jesus by studying the faith that formed him.

This type of prayer takes some practice, but anyone can do it, because it's what we most naturally do when we meet the parents of a friend. When we learn something about our friend's family, we learn something about our friend.

Zechariah couldn't imagine how God could overcome Elizabeth's old age. And he could not speak at all until he could say his new son's name, "God is faithful." The angel announced to Mary that "nothing is impossible with God." Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Mary's whole being proclaims the greatness of God and her words echo the faith of her ancestors.

As we walk around in our busy lives this week, these wonderful stories will shape our week. There will be a Zechariah-in-doubt moment, when we can't imagine God's presence, and another Zechariah moment when we can say, "God is faithful." There might be times when we will feel overwhelmed and say, "How can this be?" Hopefully we will be reminded of Mary's words and say with her, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said."

Pray in these or similar words...

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for again showing me the photo album of your family. It's a little different, praying this way, and I can feel myself being self-conscious. Be with me in this. Let me feel it bringing me closer to you.

I picture Elizabeth and Zechariah struggling to have children and finally giving up. How hard that must have been for them! Did they pull together and hold each other in their pain? How did they handle it within their marriage? Then, years later, an angel appears and tells them they will have a child.

Then I look at Mary and Joseph. She was so young. I see her laughing in the kitchen, stirring up her soup by the stove, entertaining her friends with her stories. Is that where you learned to tell stories — from your mother? Then I see her — this vivacious woman with the infectious laugh — standing in an empty kitchen when the angel appears. "Will she be the mother of God?" I watch with surprise as she struggles. She knows it will turn her life upside down! Does she really want to complicate her life this way? She just wants a simple life: to cook for her friends, to marry Joseph, and to pray at the synagogue each week. Yes, she wants to live her life for you, God, but does it have to be so hard?

It never occurred to me that Mary would struggle with this. I thought she just smiled beatifically and the decision was over. But I watch her struggle with her fears and pray to God as she always does when she is afraid. Her fears melt. Of course, if this is what God wants for her, she will do it. And there she is, still standing in the kitchen, the soup still bubbling on the stove. She looks calmly and directly at the angel and says, "Yes."

I'm not sure I ever saw your mother as a real, live person before, Jesus. I see her say yes and I wonder about the yes in my own life. I want to know you better and to make my life more like yours. I want to be open to the messages you send, even if your messengers aren't wearing wings and halos but are the people I see every day in my life. Dear Jesus, help me to recognize the messenger. Help me to listen to the message. Most of all, help me to say yes.