

### **"Miraculous Journey"**

I know a lot of people who are pregnant right now -- my sister Heidi is due in March with number two, I have several college friends and seminary friends, my co-worker Gina is pregnant for the first time. So when we talk, it's about how they are feeling or about how they are preparing -- names, rooms, so forth.

If you think about it, it is really a blessing that we have these nine months or so of pregnancy. The baby doesn't just pop out one day, like -- "wow, look honey, a baby!" The nine months, as miserable as they may be, get you and everyone else used to the idea of a baby. Some of you might have bought *What to Expect When You are Expecting*, 21 chapters, month by month, advice on everything from diet and exercise during pregnancy to travel to "membranes rupturing in public."

Pregnancy is a preparation for the coming of a child into your life. It's almost a blessing, I hear, even when you are adopting a baby, to have the wait time, when you hear of a baby available to when it comes home with you. With pregnancy or adoption, the wait time gives you time to get attached. Especially so that later, at your 2-yr-old's worst moments, when you are about to give him away to the woman behind you in the grocery aisle, that bond of love holds strong. You have had time to get attached, time to prepare for the changes.

We don't know much about Mary's pregnancy with Jesus, or about what preparations she made. Scripture only gives us hints. Her pregnancy was hard, probably with people avoiding her because they thought she had loose morals; but, like for us, her pregnancy was also a time of preparation. The pregnancy and then the trip to Bethlehem with Joseph, prepared her for this coming event of the birth of a child -- and not just any child, but the Son of God.

Through the journey and pregnancy, God prepared Mary and Joseph for the coming of Christ and all that came later. And the Scripture tells us about many other ways that God prepared them. Matthew 1 begins with a genealogy, which we usually skip over. But in those names listed, "Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob," all the way down to "Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary," there is a long history of anticipation. A long history of people faithfully waiting for the Messiah. It's a record of God preserving the line of Abraham and David down through the generations, preserving the family line from which his son would be born. And this genealogy shows that Jesus came from a long history of people who had an agreement with God, and he came from a line of kings. God was preparing the way for his son Jesus.

God prepared Mary for what was coming by having the angel Gabriel visit her, recorded for us in Luke 1. That visit let her know what was coming. Gabriel let her know who this baby was going to be, this baby Jesus, Yeshua, which means, "The Lord saves," would bring hope, would bring salvation to humankind. His very name was a preparation for what was coming!

The angel Gabriel told Mary about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Mary knew that Elizabeth was an older woman and was never able to have children--so her pregnancy is a miracle. All of this is preparing Mary for what was coming--for the birth of the Jesus.

Luke tells us that Mary went to see for herself, she goes to visit Elizabeth. When they first see each other, Elizabeth burst out in the God-inspired greeting, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Mary stayed Elizabeth for several months. That helped prepare Mary for what was coming--for God breaking down into ordinary life, for what was ahead for this child.

God even prepared Joseph for this journey and this birth. God sent an angel to him in a dream--we hear about it in Matthew 1. The angel told Joseph that Mary has not been unfaithful, the baby is really from the Holy Spirit (sets his mind at ease on that front) and tells him who this baby will be. So God was preparing Joseph to be the father of this child. This dream gave him what he needed to take Mary as his wife, to make the journey to Bethlehem, and to raise this child as his own.

Most people would have seen Mary's pregnancy as a tragedy. And it probably was a difficult time for Mary and Joseph. But through the promises, the preparation, the presence of God, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem in hope, trusting that what God said was true--that this child was really the Son of God who would bring hope. In the midst of the difficulty and confusion of the pregnancy and journey, they learned to wait on the Lord, to trust him. These lessons were probably valuable later, as they raised this child, as he grew into a man and started his ministry, in his suffering and death. What happened in these first months helped prepare them for what they would face later.

I met Amanda in Chicago, while we were both in seminary. When she graduated from seminary, she and her husband Don sold their house, Don quit his bank job, they said their goodbyes and moved all the way to Saskatchewan, Canada, to Covenant Bible College--Amanda took a position as professor and pastor on staff. They trusted that Don would find work in Canada too. Well, shortly after they moved there, CBC needed a financial comptroller--and they hired Don. Everything seemed to be working out. Then four months into their new life in Canada, the school decided to close. After they had moved all that way, risked so much, and now they would both be without jobs, at the end of the school year.

Most people would have seen that as a tragedy. But during that year, Amanda said she grew in confidence, grew in her pastoral skills, had to learn to process her own views of God and the Bible. But most of all, they learned to wait on God. God led them back to Chicago, and again provided good jobs for both of them. Amanda just started as pastor of a church in Chicago. Amanda said recently that they can look back and say, "Wow, God was in that!"

In the same way, God was preparing Mary and Joseph for what was coming through the visits of the angels, the family line of Joseph, the visit with Elizabeth, and Mary's pregnancy -- all these things were preparing Mary and Joseph for God's action in their lives.

Let me ask you this: "What has God been preparing YOU for?"

Just as God prepared Mary and Joseph, just as this journey and the pregnancy were a preparation for the birth of the Son of God -- so God prepares us for his coming into our lives, for his action, his purpose in our lives.

Through your life experiences, your losses, your opportunities, through the jobs that you have, rearing children, the skills and dreams and passions that God gave you -- *you have been prepared and are being prepared*. You have been prepared for God's action in your life. You have been prepared to be a part of God's greater plan, his greater purpose.

My mother is here today, and recently I asked her how God had prepared her for her roles today as missionary & mother, among other things. She told me how she grew up in suburban New England, where they never heard other languages spoken, everyone looked much like them. But her school was part of an experimental program teaching languages to kids in public elementary schools. Her whole family kind of got into the fun of it, even making up puns in French and English around the dinner table. She loved it so much she kept studying French, then German.

She always loved the outdoors, loved the family picnics in state parks. She was in Girl Scouts and later a Senior Scout, Trip Counselor. She learned and practiced primitive camping, led groups on trips in the

wilderness.

So, isn't it amazing that when God called her and my dad to be missionaries, he called them to Wycliffe, to work with languages? Mom had the skills and the joy in place for learning Spanish, Tepehuan, Greek, Hebrew. And she told me, "when God led us to live close to the outdoors in primitive conditions as missionaries, it was a continuation of the outdoor adventure of my life. God had been preparing me all along."

What has God been preparing *you* for?

God has prepared you through your life experiences, through what makes you tick. And he has given you a spiritual gift through the Holy Spirit. Those gifts are given to you so that you might build up the body of Christ and so that you might join in God's work in the world.

Ephesians 2:10 -- "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." God has created you with a purpose! God prepared in advance for you to be a part of his work in the world!

Who knows, maybe the fact that you knit could be exactly what God needs. Or the fact that you can teach or are good at math. Or that you lived in other cultures, or that you lost a child. Or that you were the one in on your block who got all the other kids in trouble!

Where do your experiences, passions, gifts meet the needs of the world? God is at work in the world, in this community, in this church -- and God has gifted you, prepared you exactly, to fit a certain niche in his work.

Perhaps you are going through a difficult or confusing time now. God can use it to prepare you for what is to come. Later, you might look back and say, "Wow, God was there, in the midst of that!"

Right now I am in a transition time--and I'm not sure what God is doing: why he had Joel and I move to Tucson, what is next for us. But I am learning to wait on God, to trust his promises, to trust that he will use this time in his good plan.

Nothing that happens to you is wasted in God's planning. Nothing that happens to you, no part of who you are, that God cannot find a way to use in his amazing plan. He is a God that turns everything into good! So he can take your life, all the joys and sorrows and gifts and quirks that you are, and use them in his plan. Use them in his work in the world. *Your life is a miraculous journey!*

How does this happen? It happens when we are willing and available to God. God chose Mary and Joseph, two people who were open and responsive to him. They obeyed and accepted, even though it meant a hard journey. Mary accepted the angel's announcement to her that she would have a baby with the simple words, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me according to your word." In order for God to use us, the only requirement is to turn ourselves over to him. And to use our present circumstances as time to learn to wait on God. To trust that nothing is wasted in his plan.

This weekend we enter the season in the church year called Advent, a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. As you prepare for Christmas over the next few weeks, remember the journey of Mary and Joseph, of how God prepared them for the birth of his Son. Take time to prepare your hearts spiritually. Consider how you can respond to what God has done in your life -- what has God prepared you for? How will your life be a miraculous journey?

Let's pray.