

Grace and peace to you all from our heavenly Father and from Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Some churches are big on having personal testimony as a part of weekly worship. If you've been to a worship service like that you'll usually here three things about the person. (1) You'll hear about how they strayed from God or how they messed up royally in their life. (2) You'll hear about a moment when the light bulb finally clicked on for them and how they've surrendered their life to Jesus. (3) You'll hear about how life has been since they've seen the light; for some life has become much more bearable, for others life continues to be a struggle but at least they know now that God is a gracious and forgiving God. However, I imagine what it would be like for the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary to give a testimony. If she did, I don't think it would look anything like what I talked about before. I can just imagine the preacher saying to this young teenage woman, "What has God done for you?" I'm not exactly sure how Mary might respond to that question, but here's is my guess. I'm guessing Mary might say the following: "Let me tell you all about how God ruined my life." And after saying this, just imagine the sound in the church...nothing but silence and crickets chirping.

If you think about it, God really did ruin Mary's life. I say that kind tongue-in-cheek of course, because God did some wonderful and powerful things through and for Mary; after all, she did carry and bear the Savior of the world, the same Savior who would carry and bear our sin and death upon himself on the cross, the same Savior and Son who she would see die before her very eyes. However, let's get back and look at this Mary, the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, to see exactly how God "ruined" her life.

We see in our passage from Luke that Mary was a virgin. This fact is so important that Luke mentions this twice in the same passage, and tells us how Mary says so herself in verse 34. And this word, “virgin,” implies two things: (1) She was very young, probably around 13 or 14 years old and (2) she had never been intimate with a man. Now, virginity was and is still seen as a mark of purity. I won’t get into any details, because I think you all know why virginity was and is still important, especially for teenagers and young adults. But what I will say about virginity is that even though Mary became pregnant simply by listening and trusting in God’s promise for her and still remained a virgin, I’m sure very few people in Nazareth really believed her. After all, if a 13 year old girl comes up to you and says, “I’m pregnant, but the child is God’s Son,” I’m sure we still would laugh in disbelief. Soon after this, Mary “gets out of Dodge.” Scripture doesn’t tell us why Mary soon leaves Nazareth to visit her cousin Elizabeth, but I bet it might have been because of all the evil eyes staring at her, because of all the whispering and the gossip going on in Nazareth that caused Mary to leave. As we all know from living in Escanaba, not too many rumors go unheard or unknown. Rumors tend to take a life of their own on. Not part of our reading today, but we read in verse 39 that, “Mary set out and went with haste.” So here we may see evidence that Mary’s reputation was indeed ruined. Thanks a lot God. And if you’ve even seen the “The Nativity Story” movie already, you’ll get a good sense of the ridicule and scorn she (and Joseph) had to endure.

We also see that Mary was engaged. In those days, if you were engaged, you were typically engaged for around 9 months, to make sure the woman you were going to marry wasn’t pregnant already. From the fact she was engaged, we could imagine that she had a promising future ahead of her, something all couples have when they look at “tying the knot.” And we shouldn’t forget

about Joseph either, he also had a lot going for him and a lot to look forward to. So here we have this woman and this man, and what does God decide to do? God decides to interrupt their lives, ruin any plans they may have had for the future, and give them a present and a future so completely and so entirely new, that Mary herself didn't know what to say. We see in our passage how she was "perplexed by his [the angel] words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Another translation I've read says, "She was greatly perturbed at the word and began to argue with herself of what kind this greeting might be." And who wouldn't be greatly perturbed or upset by such a sudden change in life?

So let's recap about what's going on with Mary. She's a virgin who is about to become pregnant, apart from the help of Joseph or any other man, but by the power of God's Holy Spirit, and she's going to be pregnant before she is married – something that could have been punished by banishment or death. She's also seen and talked with an angel, a messenger from God. Her upcoming marriage could possibly fall apart. And, most likely, her family and the town where she grew up looked down their noses at her full of contempt. After all, how would you react to some young teenage girl who's just talked with an angel, found out that she's pregnant and her husband to be isn't the father, and that all of this is God's doing? You would think she's either telling one of the tallest tales you've ever heard, is lying through her teeth, and that she's good for nothing but to look down at or make fun of or just another person to spread lies and rumors about. Like I said before, God has just ruined her life.

This is a very strange God we have to say the least. But that's part of the beauty of how God has worked and how God is working in the world. God ruins, God transforms, the life of those who

He favors. I for one can't help but to chuckle and laugh when I hear the angel Gabriel say to Mary, "Greetings, favored one!" I mean, if this is how God shows his favor to those whom He loves, I might want to say to God, "Thanks, but no thanks God. Why don't you find someone else?" Because of that, it's no surprise that the angel also says to Mary, "Do not be afraid." But Mary doesn't tell this angel, this messenger of God to get lost. Instead she says to all of this: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

I've said a few times how God has ruined Mary's life. Now, let me spell out what I mean by that. Something we see time and time again throughout Scripture, throughout history, even throughout our lives, is how God uses and empowers people who are the outcasts, people who are looked down upon, people who are mocked, and people who are in the eyes of the world good-for-nothing and worthless. If we look through the Bible we see a number of examples of people God favored, transformed, and used for his glory: Noah who built the ark liked his wine a bit too much, Jacob tricked his father into giving him the inheritance that rightfully belonged to his brother Esau, David was a murderer and an adulterer, St. Peter denied the Lord three times, and St. Paul persecuted Christians until he himself followed Jesus Christ. This isn't saying that what all these people did was right, far from that, what they did was wrong and they knew it and they repented. What all of this is to say is that God shows His favor to the most unlikely people, the most imperfect people, the most ordinary people, for His mission in this world to bring all people to the knowledge of salvation through Jesus Christ and to put people, like you, into an intimate relationship with that same Jesus Christ, the Son of God conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Son of Man born of the Virgin Mary.

So, now I look out at all of you favored ones of God, I look out at all of you fellow outcasts from the “island of misfit toys,” I look out at you all and ask you to wonder and think and dream and imagine how God already is using you, ordinary you, for His glory. Or if you don’t think God is, I want you to wonder to think to dream to imagine how God wants to use you, ordinary you, for His glory where you’re at – at home, at school, in the workplace, in the community, through this house of God, wherever you’re at. As the angel Gabriel reminds us all of this unshakeable promise: “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if Mary did begin her testimony by saying: “Let me tell you how God ruined my life.” I’m sure she wouldn’t stop there. After grabbing everyone’s attention, I’m sure she would say more than that. After getting everyone’s attention, she would probably tell everyone about how this God chooses and favors the most unlikely people like herself, she would tell everyone about how God is faithful and God’s will is done even in the midst of pain and death and uncertainty, and she would also do what John the Baptist did – point everyone away from herself and to the Risen Lord who forgave and forgives all outcasts: alcoholics, addicts, unwed mothers, unwed fathers, divorcees, sinners like you and me, or any other outcast you can think of. And Mary would do this because she gave birth to who was and is the biggest Outcast the world has ever known; the one and only Outcast who was born in a manger and nailed to a cross for you and for me; Jesus Christ our Lord.

May this Outcast who we worship, trust in, pray to, and bet everything we have on be with you this final week before Christmas and always. Amen.