

Mary was a woman of great faith. In fact, Mary and Joseph were devout Old Testament Jewish believers. This is proven by their reaction to God’s work in their lives. Following their spiritual confirmation that God had indeed caused Mary to be with child, this couple remained faithful to each other and to God throughout their life together. Mary, after meeting the angel Gabriel at the well, surrendered to God’s will for her life even if it meant pregnancy, reproach, and being misunderstood by her family and her betrothed husband-to-be, Joseph, her friends, and the entire village of Nazareth. Deep in her heart she knew the truth of God’s promise and the miracle at work in her virgin body. She also took the risk that her betrothed would indeed divorce her and leave her in total disgrace and poverty. But, by faith, she trusted God to make things right and to work on her behalf. I am sure that when Mary told Joseph of the angelic visitation and saw his disbelief, she prayed with all of her might that Joseph would believe her and that God would somehow confirm to Joseph that her story was true. What a relief must have come to Mary when Joseph told her of his own Advent experience and that he did believe that an angel had spoken to Mary! I am sure that Mary went back to God in prayer, thankful and grateful beyond measure that Joseph was also a part of this miracle.

Joseph did indeed marry the virgin and took upon himself the reproach of Mary’s pregnancy. Joseph “did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” This was a sign of Joseph’s spiritual maturity, his faith in God, his spiritual trust in God, and his audacity to walk by faith even when the rest of the world did not believe him. His faithfulness to Mary and to their life together was an example of

Joseph's faithfulness to God and to his love for God and for Mary. Matthew testifies that Joseph had the maturity "not to have union with her until she gave birth to a son." Joseph knew that his dream was a message from God and he proved his faithfulness to God by being faithful to Mary.

When they were forced to go to Bethlehem and to have the baby in the stable, and when they heard the witness of the shepherds about the angel choir, it was again confirmed in their hearts that they were doing God's will and that God was doing a miracle in their midst. And when they went to the temple, in our text today, and heard the witnesses of Simeon and of Anna, this promise was made all the more sure. Everywhere they went God was working and witnessing to them that their journey -- their lives, the birth of this miracle child -- was proof of God working in them, through them and around them.

God was making it known to them through situations and people beyond their control that this was indeed God's will and action in their lives. All of these witnesses as well as that of the wise men even perhaps a year later, confirmed that Mary's child was indeed the miracle of God. These witnesses helped Mary and Joseph to know that their lives were special, that Mary had been specifically chosen by God to do this very special thing. All of these witnesses also helped them when they had to flee to Egypt, to hide from King Herod and endure more heartache and fear than most people. God was at work! God had indeed come into their lives. Because of this great Advent their lives would never be the same.

And yet, they were also people living in a long line of people whom God had called and led by faith. They could just look back on their heritage and see that God had been working with their ancestors long before they came on the scene.

The work of God through Mary and Joseph was truly unique because of Jesus. But their walk by faith, their spiritual trust in God and the demand to walk in obedience to God was not unique. It was one more historical account of people who had turned to God by faith for their salvation and who sought to trust God and follow God through this human experience we call life. Each generation has its own story.

This is what Hebrews 11, “the Faith Chapter”, is teaching us as it recounts the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and Rahab. The Old Testament bears witness to God’s intervention in the lives the patriarchs, judges, kings and prophets of the Old Testament. The message is that when Jesus came, the people of the New Testament also witnessed God working in their lives and time. It says that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God can directly impact our lives as well today in the 21st century if we allow him. And as we walk by faith, God will work in our lives as we become more and more like Christ and learn the disciplines of grace, faith, trust, prayer, and reflect the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, moving forward by faith as God leads.

Why is this so? It is so because as Christians we have been grafted into this long line of chosen people. As Christians we have become a part of God’s covenant people of today. When we put our faith in Christ and take on his name and we enter into the covenant work of God on the planet. However, to do so means both faith and sacrifice. We become adopted children of God—not only a part of the promise but a part of the reproach, as well. We not only become a part of God’s redemption plan working through faithful people, but we also become the targets of evil and the reproach of those who do not believe. We not only take our place in that great cloud of witnesses throughout Bible history, but we also join the persecuted and the ranks of those the world looks down on and alienates.

This is a part of our everyday Christian experience. I remember when the door opened for me to go to Bible college and the tears my mother shed when I confirmed that going to Iowa to Vennard Bible College was indeed what I wanted to do and what God wanted me to do. I remember God's anointing when my cousin was taunting my faith and I prayed that the next time she put a bottle of alcohol to her lips that God would make her ill; I remember when my cousin confirmed that she had indeed gotten deathly sick the next time she'd gone to a party and drank. I remember the look on my brothers' faces when I told them that I didn't want to be a part of the party scene any longer and that I was going to live my life as a Christian; I remember the alienation I felt from them as they felt a certain condemnation. Once one of my brothers told me, "Cal, you don't know how hard it is being the brother of a person who's going into the ministry." My answer to him was, "No, sadly I do not." I mourned the fact that none of my brothers followed me, but rather were embarrassed by my commitment to follow Christ. I had not only made a commitment to God to follow him with all of my heart, but I had also taken on the reproach of Christ by those who felt condemned by my commitment. It is a two-edged sword that even alienated me from my family.

And this is exactly what Simeon is telling Mary in our text today. Hear again what Simeon tells Mary. "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." We know that this prophecy came true. Mary and Joseph were very much blessed. But Jesus exposed the hearts of many and made both friends and enemies. Those who accepted Jesus as Messiah were saved, and Jesus is still saving those

who believe in his name. But the presence of Jesus also exposes those who reject him and their hearts are guilty and condemned. We know that Mary witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and how that must have pierced her heart to the very core. Mary received the greatest of blessings and at the same time experienced the greatest of hardships, all because she was faithful to God and God's will for her life.

And we are called to do the same. Today, 2000 years later, the name of Jesus still divides hearts and families. The name of Jesus still exposes those who believe and those who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord. The name of Jesus also exposes sin and sinful lifestyles. The name of Jesus divides those who walk by faith from those who do not. Today we still have those who can tell us specifically when God came into their lives and changed them forever. They testify of their own personal advent when God came into their lives in ways that they cannot deny, and they can share the story of how God has changed their lives and guided them, giving them lives that are brand new. God has also given us lives that we would never change, even if we had the chance.

Have you had a personal Advent? Have you put your faith in what Jesus has done for you? In a few days we will celebrate the birthday of Jesus -- the day Jesus came into the world. Do you have an Advent birthday, a day when Jesus came into your world and changed your life? Do you remember the first time you took Jesus at his word and moved forward by faith? What has God done in your life to show you his love, grace, forgiveness and emancipation from the bondage of sin? Are you expecting God to work through you today as the arms and legs of Christ, ministering to those around you? God wants us to have an Advent today as we expect Christ's arrival in our age and time. The testimony of those who came before us is that God is here, God is active, and God can work around us,

in us, with us, and through us. Our present Advents only come when we are praying, specifically for God to come with power, anointing, wisdom, truth, courage, and with faith in action.

Our day is no different than the days of old, whether it is in the time of Moses, the time of David, the time of Jonah, the time of Christ, the time of Pope Gregory 1, the time of the Reformation, the time of the Methodist revival or the time of Billy Graham or Martin Luther King Junior. God was – and is – at work! The time is today, and today as we're remembering the time when Christ first came, we can also look forward to what Jesus Christ is doing today and will actively do tomorrow. We are a part of Christ's Advent today if we surrender to his will for our lives and begin to walk by faith, expecting God to do his work in us in this hour! Christ is coming to the people around us as we make ourselves available for God to use as his voice and witness.

If you have never had a personal Advent, today can be the first day of a brand new life. Will you come today? Will you make yourself available for God to use you in ministry? Take some time right now to speak to God. If you never have before, ask him to come into your heart -- into your life -- and be your Savior. Ask Jesus to come into your life and be your master. Ask him to take your life today and make your talents and gifts special for his use in the kingdom of God.