Nine Months in the Womb with Christ

March: Mary’s First Moments with Jesus

Relevant Scripture: Luke 1: 26-37

In this moment, the miracle of life has been revolutionized again. At the beginning of time, God the Father had spoken the words, “Let there be light,” and so it had come to be. Now, as creation reaches for its pinnacle, the Word of God made flesh is conceived and brought into the world of creation through the words of a teenage girl. Mary said, “Let it be done to me according to your word.” In this moment, the world’s true light has already come into our existence. He comes not as a conquering king, not as a noble child, not even as the infant in swaddling clothes. He comes first and foremost in the form of a single fragile cell of humanity, wrapped securely inside the warmth of his mother’s body.

He is so small that even if he were not inside his mother’s womb, he would not be identifiable to the naked eye. He is so helpless, that the setting in which he currently resides is the only one capable of sustaining his life. Yet, he is already wholly and utterly the God-man, destined to save all of humanity through his love and his sacrifice. People will speak of His first 30 years on earth as the hidden time of his life because it comes before his public ministry. During those many years, only his parents, relatives, and perhaps a few neighbors will benefit from his daily presence.

But in truth, these moments are the most hidden of the Messiah’s life. For these moments in the womb are preserved even from his family and his earthly father. This time is preserved such that only his mother can share the precious time with him. In some ways, He feels further away to Mary than he will after his birth. For she cannot hug and kiss him, she cannot clean his face, or tousle his hair as she rocks him to sleep. Yet, in other ways, these are the most intimate moments that any human being will ever have with the God of the Universe. She rubs the side of her stomach affectionately, though of course his one cell does not yet feel it physically. She smiles and feels no fear.

Mary turns her thoughts to the other women who have experienced pregnancy like this. Of course no one else has conceived God in their womb, but countless other women have found themselves pregnant and alone. She thought of Joseph, her betrothed. Would he understand? Would he still want to marry her? She hoped he would, but she trusted that whatever else happened, God would provide whatever was needed. She began offering up prayers for the other women who have felt lost and desperate in pregnancy. Other girls in circumstances like hers might feel deeply alone. She has never felt so alone in her entire life! Throughout this next month, please pray especially for women in crisis pregnancies.

Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

April: Elizabeth’s Burden

Relevant Scripture: Luke 1: 5-17

Old Elizabeth’s burden was a quiet one. She always carried herself with a confidence and dignity that was fitting to the wife of a high priest. She had been beautiful as a young women and even more so as she reached the late years of life. Zechariah always referred to her as the greatest joy in his life, and he meant it no doubt. He knew these things were complicated and never blamed her in the least. Still, she would wrongly blame herself. When she would find herself alone in their home, her pain would often strike her as sharp as knife. Even now, as her friends celebrated grandchildren, the pain of her barrenness could be so intense as to leave her teary-eyed and breathless at times.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were truly pillars in their community. Likewise, they had worked hard to nurture an environment of deep love, commitment, and kindness in their home. Why had the Lord not blessed them with just one son or daughter upon which to shower so much love? And if that could not be an option, why could He not at least let the desire of her heart begin to wane? Why could this piercing not be softened by the many other blessings in her life?

Of course, Elizabeth knew well the derision with which the younger mothers sometimes spoke of her. She could see behind the silly facades of women half her age who thought they were too superior to even associate with a *barren woman*. These did not bother her. There was even something comical about their absurdity. No, what hurt the most was her knowledge that children were being born in every corner of the world. Many were even being neglected or abandoned. Yet, she and her dear husband were being denied this most basic of human longings, the desire for a child of their own to love and raise according to the law of Moses.

Then, that strange morning came when Zechariah lost his voice. She would have thought he might be distraught to lose something so important to his daily life. Yet, he seemed completely unconcerned, almost joyful. What did he know? What secret was it that he could no longer share with her? Weeks later, she felt something strange inside her, a bubbliness or a tickle. She knew it was madness. She knew it was impossible, and yet somehow, she also knew beyond any shadow of doubt that the Lord had finally blessed them. She chuckled to herself. Old Elizabeth was finally going to be a mother!

*Over the next month please pray especially for all those couples who struggle with the heavy burden of infertility. May Christ free them from their grief while also leading them to fertility practices fully in line with their own dignity and the dignity of their potential offspring.*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

May: The Story of Zechariah

Relevant Scripture: Luke 1: 18-25 and Luke 1:57-64

Zechariah is an old man who had always garnered respect from the people around him. He had even held the honor high priest for a time. When he entered a room, people would hush for a moment out of deference to the stature of his reputation. Or at least they used to, until that fateful when he met an angel in the Holy of Holies. When he lost his voice, people at first treated him with still more respect, but that began to fade after a few weeks. Far from noticing him with respect, many people from his community failed to notice him at all.

He had once been recognized as the greatest mind in the hill country. Families would come and beg him to instruct teenage sons in the law and the Torah. No one came around anymore. His wife’s joy at becoming pregnant made it still harder for him. He wanted to be happy for her, but he just felt more isolated. Now, people would travel great distances to see the miracle of his old pregnant wife. They would smile at him warmly but then ignore him for the rest of their visit. He didn’t blame them, of course. What was the point of speaking with him if he did not know how to respond?

Yet Zechariah was no fool. As the months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy dragged by, he reflected on how even this apparent curse was really a blessing. His quiet, more solitary life left him with plenty of time for prayer and introspection. He began thinking deeper thoughts about God and about life than ever before in his long life. He also thought of the many around him who had lived their whole lives with one disability or another. Some were blind, deaf, or crippled. A few were mute like himself, but they had all gotten better than him at finding ways to communicate.

He began watching these other people more carefully, these people who were so accustomed to being ignored or disregarded. He realized that each of them had so much more life in them than he had ever imagined. They had such joy and purpose in life. The rest of the world might have seen them as somehow broken, but they did not see themselves that way. They just saw themselves as… themselves. Their disabilities were part of them, but they were not defined by them. They were defined the same way as everyone else, by how they lived and how they loved.

On the day Zechariah’s son John was born, he was shocked to find his feelings bittersweet. He was thrilled to be a father at last! He also felt relief to recover his voice, and yet, he found himself only hoping that he would be able to hold onto the grand insights that such a time with a disability had been able to grant him.

*Throughout this next month, please pray especially for the needs of disabled persons.*



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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

June: Messenger and Witness of Creation

Relevant Scripture: John 1:1

When the angel Gabriel announced the good news to Mary that she would bring forth the Son of God into the world, he was, of course, no mortal messenger. He had a perspective on the cosmos far greater than any human ever could. As a purely spiritual being, his existence was outside of our experience of time, so that he could see the vastness of the material cosmos, across every light year from beginning to end. Such a “bird’s eye view” of the universe gave him deep appreciation for the purpose of all that God created and would be reconciling to himself through Christ Jesus.

With such an understanding, Gabriel was overjoyed to share the news of Jesus coming into the flesh and blood world. For not only was God to reveal to humanity the plan for their salvation. The person of Jesus would impart an understanding of the full power of the Creator over all that He created. From the beginning of time, Gabriel knew that God had called each and everything that He had created “good.” This look of love from his Master, who was the supreme good, meant that everything the angel saw in the cosmos was endowed with its own Godly integrity, its own purpose. All of it was a sacrament, telling him something new about the infinite majesty of his beloved Master.

With Mary’s courageous “yes” to Gabriel’s news, God would then begin to knit Jesus’s humanity out of the very same matter and energy of the universe that existed since the Big Bang, over 13 billion years before Mary walked the earth. God had a plan for all of it, some of it for its own well-being, some of it for humanity’s flourishing. But Gabriel felt an overwhelming sense of privilege to be the messenger witness to the progression of it all – the star dust from the beginning; its coalescing into the rock, water, and air of the Earth; the plant and animal life teeming on it; from them, the nutritious building blocks that gave Mary her physical life; and, eventually, the body of Jesus himself, lovingly cradled in the womb of his mother during his development. From the Big Bang to the Son, the incarnation would bring all things into the physical body of Jesus and the spiritual Body of Christ.

Gabriel saw how God had placed humanity at the pinnacle of the physical creation, for these men and women were given the power and free will to decide how to use creation’s limited resources in order to support the life and dignity of every member of the human family. On top of that, God also gave them the awesome responsibility to protect the integrity of the natural world and its ecosystems. The angel recalled how God had instructed them to both “till it” and “keep it.” (Gen. 2:15). Till it for all. Keep it for God’s divine plan of union between heaven and earth.

As the months of Mary’s pregnancy progressed, what most moved Gabriel was to see Mary sing to her unborn child and brush upon her womb with such immeasurable love and affection. It reminded him of what God was feeling for His own creation, the stars and planets, the waters, the sky, the land, plants and animals, and people. In a similar way, all these things were growing towards the Kingdom of God, a new creation which God will birth at the end of time.

Gabriel would continue to hope and pray for millennia after Jesus’ birth that God’s people would remember that nothing ever belonged to them but to the One from whom they came to be.

*Throughout this next month, please pray that we practice better environmental stewardship and concern for the poor and vulnerable who are impacted by how we choose to use the Earth’s resources. Let us also pray for guidance to leaders and policy makers, so they may make prudent choices regarding the environment and the poor.*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

July: Life Almost Taken Too Early

Relevant Scripture: Mt. 1: 18-21; Deuteronomy 22: 21-23

Shortly into her pregnancy, Joseph discovers that Mary, his betrothed, is with child. They have not lived together yet, so Joseph knows he did not father the child in her womb. Joseph has a dilemma in front of him. What should he do?  *Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.* The word shame falls softly on our 21st century ears. We have learned to shrug off shame like some light scarf on our shoulders and then keep on walking. We hardly acknowledge it was there.

Shame in Mary and Joseph’s day entailed far more in their community. Shame, Deuteronomy tells us, gave the husband the “right,” when his wife’s virginity was in question, to call for her to be stoned to death in front of her father’s house, “*because she committed a shameful crime in Israel*.” Matthew tells us Joseph did not want to expose her to shame, instead he was going to divorce her quietly. He chose not to seek a public death scene for all to witness in their community.

A quiet divorce was going to be his answer to this unfathomable pregnancy. Then Joseph had a dream and the Angel of the Lord offered him an alternative – to take Mary and the child she carried into his home, not push her out. In this dream Joseph learns Mary had conceived this child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph accepted this alternative to death and divorce and bolstered by the angel’s revelation, drew both mother and unborn child into his home. He chose to honor life.

Today we are in a similar position to Joseph. Ohio law says we have “a right” to take someone’s life when they commit “a shameful crime” against our state, against us. God has blessed us with free will to make the choice, to be open to his Word coming to us, to seek a life-giving alternative. We know that Jesus suffered a death penalty on Calvary, but that wasn’t the first time he faced a possible death sentence. He and his mother narrowly escaped a legally-approved death penalty before he was even born.

*Throughout the next month, please pray for all persons scheduled to be executed by the state. Ohio’s Catholic Bishops are partnering with Ohioans to Stop Execution and its People of Faith Initiative to unite religious congregations in a campaign to end the use of the death penalty in Ohio. There are various opportunities and actions offered through the initiative to affirm support for legislation implementing reforms recommended by the Ohio Supreme Court Joint Task Force on the Administration of Ohio’s Death Penalty. You can learn more at www.otse.org.*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

August: The Old Man’s Purpose

Relevant Scripture: Luke 2: 22-38

 Simeon completed his long journey up the seven steps to his antechamber in order to receive the new presentations of the day. His knees and ankles ached. His cheeks were flushed from the exertion of so much effort. His mind felt foggy and old. It was not yet the third hour after sunrise, and he found himself already longing for the relative comfort of his sleeping mat. “How long, Lord?” he called out to no one in particular. He thought it would come out as a shout, but it was really more of a whimper.

 Simeon was the oldest priest attendant to still be working at the temple. He was, in fact, the oldest man that most attendants had ever seen. Even those rare men who did make it into the seventies would usually retire out into the country to be cared for by younger family members. Simeon was well past eighty, and still he persevered in his tasks at the temple. The other priestly members always spoke to him with an air of respect, for they were righteous Jews who had learned from childhood to honor those advanced in years. Yet, despite their deference to him, many quietly questioned what purpose could possibly justify his continued efforts.

 In addition to his frailty, Simeon was beginning to suffer from lapses in memory as well. With all these factors closing in upon him at once, it was no wonder he was beginning to struggle with temptations of hopelessness as well. But God had made him a promise while he was still a young man. Clear as day, he had heard the voice of God’s Spirit declare that he would not pass away before seeing the Messiah. For decades now, he had looked with curious eyes upon every priest, nobleman, and rabbi to come to the temple at Jerusalem. But the presence of the spirit never pointed to any of them. Still he waited, trusting that THE LORD would remain faithful.

 Now, on this cold gray morning, as he struggled to pray through his pain and fatigue, he heard the soft cooing of a newborn child from the next room over. Instantly, his mind cleared. The pain and exhaustion receded from within his body. This ancient man jumped from his place to follow the cooing sounds of a baby boy. With a sort of sixth sense he could never describe to others, Simeon saw the spirit of THE LORD rushing upon the child being presented at temple. With strength that surprised everyone in the room, he scooped the child into his arms and wept tears of joy. He thought of all his pain and struggle to hold on for the fulfillment of his destiny. It all culminated in this moment.

 “Of course,” he exclaimed. “He must come as a small child!” Simeon glanced around the room to share a warm smile with the other souls who must also be experiencing his joy. Much to his surprise, the other priests and Levites in the room looked dumbfounded. Simeon realized that it had not been for them to behold and understand this moment. It had been his blessing and his task alone. He looked first at the child’s father, a strong carpenter. The man appeared to be startled but trying to process, as if he had grown accustomed to being caught off-guard by the workings of God. Simeon then turned to the child’s mother who was beaming with a joy and understanding that matched his own. This woman, he realized, was rich with the presence of God’s Spirit, more so than even himself.

 After praising God and offering his own humble blessing to the wondrous child, the old man shared a few words of insight with his mother and then returned to his own quarters. He had waited so long to fulfill his God-given task on this day. He had recognized and born witness to presence of the Messiah of Israel. As he sat to rest his weary body, he pondered how each man and woman on this planet is given a holy purpose by THE LORD. It is for none but God to say when their purpose is truly complete. If they give up even a moment early, they might just miss the greatest moment this life has to offer.

 *Throughout this month, please pray to Christ in the Womb for the elderly amongst us, that all might honor the wisdom of their years and recognize that God has an essential ongoing purpose for their lives on this earth.*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

September: The Lost Children

Relevant Scripture: Jeremiah 31:15

Joseph the Carpenter had lived long enough to know that not every day is a good day.  There are many good days, like the day an angel came to him in a dream and told him to accept Mary into his home.  That was a good day because it meant that by their marriage, Mary and Joseph were serving God’s greater plan.  The day Jesus was born was more than a good day.  It was a glorious day in which Joseph felt and touched the very physical presence of God.  Every day since had been forever better because of that day.  Watching the baby grow was the answered prayer of a father’s heart, and it was answered prayers for all the children of Abraham awaiting the fulfillment of Israel.

Yes, humble and quiet Joseph knew that he was serving a greater good than any that had yet been seen on Earth, and this fact always brought him warm feelings of hope.  Yet, even this reflection could not shake the horror of what was currently happening in Bethlehem.  Joseph did not want to picture it, but he was a father now.  The sorrow and bloodshed were too near, too real to shake from his imagination.

Of course Joseph had always been repulsed by the idea of human suffering, but now that he had become the adoptive father of Jesus, he found within himself a new sensitivity to the suffering of children in particular.  So often in the history of Cana, there had been slaughter and bloodshed.  So often, children had suffered the worst of it.  Fragile, helpless, and innocent children who are most deserving of humanity’s protection often bear the worst of human affliction.  How could this be?

Joseph looked down at his son, sleeping peacefully through this trip to Egypt.  He thought of the great things this boy must be destined to accomplish?  This was the only one to be spared from Herod’s wrath.  And yet, something inside Joseph already had a premonition that this beautiful boy, this Messiah would not ultimately be spared suffering after all.  He would take it up unto himself and give it new meaning and value. Jesus was not going to flee from the suffering of children. At the appointed he would join in their sorrow. Yes, even in this darkest of evil moments, Jesus would remain a source of hope: for Joseph and Mary, for parents everywhere, and for those helpless little ones of the earth who unjustly suffer the very worst.

 *Throughout this month, please pray for all the suffering children of the world, the war-torn, exiled, abused, neglected, and aborted. And please pray that all of us will have our hearts changed, that we might better partake in their suffering, both to lessen their burden and to let them know they are not alone.*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

October: A home in our hearts and community

Relevant Scripture: Luke 2:6-7

With today’s pregnancies, we often talk about a woman instinctively knowing she is about to deliver. The closer she gets to her time, it is said, she begins with nesting tendencies, doing cleaning tasks and fixing up the nursery, readying “her nest (home)” for the little one who is about to be born.

Scriptures don’t tell us if Mary ever had those “nesting” instincts right before she gave birth to Jesus. We do know she was busy: Joseph was travelling with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Lk 2:5) We also know that Mary wasn’t at home, cleaning or fixing up a room. “ ... she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Lk 2:7)

One detail of this marvelous birth, which later will make angels sing, shepherds visit and magi present gifts, goes almost unnoticed. This family is homeless. There was no room for them in the inn. That happens sometimes when you are traveling, you might be temporarily displaced, but home is always at the end of the journey. For Mary, Joseph and Jesus there was no immediate return home, instead they fled to Egypt to protect their son from a king crazed by jealousy who wanted to kill him.

 We might not be aware of homelessness, but the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio reported that people in families made up 38% of the total homeless population in 2013. The National Center on Family Homelessness tells us “One in 45 children experiences homelessness in America each year. That's over 1.6 million children. While homeless, they experience high rates of acute and chronic health problems. The constant barrage of stressful and traumatic experience also has profound effects on their development and ability to learn.”

Who of us wouldn’t have offered the spare bedroom to the Holy Family if we knew they were looking for a place to stay as they travelled through our town? Yet all families are holy, because each person is made in the image and likeness of God.

There are plenty of opportunities to help homeless families in every community. Homeless shelters can use your donations of money, goods and time to house families or to get them on their feet. Be a parish that cooks meals for the homeless shelter or offers a community meal. Help build a Habitat for Humanity home in Cincinnati and Dayton or a Catch the Building Spirit home in Dayton. Outfit a home for refugees resettled by Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley in Dayton or by Catholic Charities Southwestern Ohio.

*Throughout the next month, please keep homeless families locally and throughout the world in your prayers as you remember that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were also homeless. St. Augustine reminded us that we, too, are homeless on this journey to our eternal home. “Our heart is restless until is rests in you.”*

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Nine Months with Christ in the Womb

November: The Weary Traveler’s Welcome

Relevant Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-18;

Nine months have nearly gone by. For young Mary, at times the Angel Gabriel’s announcement to her feels like yesterday; at times it feels like ages ago. Her body is swelling, and she has begun to experience initial contractions. Even through back aches and fatigue, she is filled with quiet wonder at the life growing within her.

Because of Caesar’s decree, Mary and her husband Joseph must set out to Bethlehem to register for the census. She would rather stay home, but she knows they must go for the well-being of their growing family. Mary’s mother Anna sends them off with fresh-baked bread and an embrace only a mother can give. She is worried and prays that Yahweh will guide them.

The journey feels endless. Mary winces at every jolt of the donkey’s plodding. Joseph holds her hand tightly and looks out for thieves as the two walk unknown paths. He is anxious to bring his wife and unborn child to safety once again.

Bethlehem is a zoo, filled with crowds in town for the census, and Mary is exhausted. Joseph leads her carefully through the dusty streets, trying to food and an open guest room. He grows discouraged as, one by one, homeowners lean out the doors and shake their heads. “I’m sorry. We’re all full here.” Some people are kinder than others.

As night draws, Mary’s contractions grow stronger. Her face tightens in sharp pain with each one. Poor and alone in a strange land, Joseph feels secretly ashamed that he cannot do better for the wife and baby he already loves so much. They find a cave on the outskirts of town where some animals are tethered. With great tenderness, he lays his cloaks over the piles of straw and helps Mary lower herself to the ground. Both of them wish that it didn’t have to happen this way, so far from their loved ones. However, with deep faith, and through screams and sweat, the Son of God is born.

As a teenager, Jesus will love to hear his mom tell the story of his birth. He is amazed at what she went through on that day and, later, during the perilous escape into Egypt. He knows that his parents endured terrible hardship and rejection, all so that their family could have a good life. Jesus vows to be a man of compassion and hospitality, welcoming all who come to him as if they were his own mother on that cold night in Bethlehem.

Years later, Jesus holds Mary and Joseph in his heart as he stands before the crowds and challenges them with knowing passion, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, ***I was a stranger and you welcomed me***.”

*This month, please pray for all migrants and refugees seeking safety and stability in foreign lands. May the Holy Spirit inspire us to work tirelessly to welcome them and to change the unjust systems that drive them from their homelands.*

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