

Nine months. Since the moment when an angel interrupted her life it had been nine months.

The angel had come with a wonderful word. Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

Nine months. After the angel left her, soon life began to grow in her. At first there was nothing Mary could be sure of except the angel's word. Was it a dream, an hallucination? Or had God really done what God had never done before?

Right away Mary left home, went to be with her relative Elizabeth whom the angel had mentioned. The angel's word about Elizabeth was true. Elizabeth, past the normal age of child bearing would soon have her first child.

Three months <sup>Mary</sup> ~~she~~ stayed there. Did she begin to know for sure then, know that indeed a life was growing within her?

She was betrothed, promised for some time to a man named Joseph. Most likely their families had arranged the betrothal, possibly years earlier. Mary, carrying the child to be named Jesus in her womb, returned home. But who would believe of an angel's visit? Would <sup>Mary's</sup> ~~her~~ mother, her father, Joseph?

Mary was pregnant, the certain sign of adultery. She was unmarried. We know that Joseph, when he found out decided to divorce her quietly. He could have demanded her death for her unfaithfulness, but he planned to be merciful. Did she tell him of the angel's visit? Did he doubt her?

We know that Joseph was given a dream. The angel in his dream said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the

child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

Now Mary and Joseph knew, believed. But no one else. Their lot was shame. Pregnant before marriage, all the village, all their families and friends must have thought them terrible sinners, and liars if they told stories of angels and God. Sinners and liars, shamed.

As the fetus grew within her, so grew the shame. Maybe she stayed hidden, so the shame was confined to her immediate household.

Then came the demand of the census, the journey as husband and wife even though they still were not married. Then came the moment when no place for them could be found, the beginning of labor, the struggle and trial of giving birth to this child.

Then there he was, breathing, alive, all the shame and struggle and pain forgotten now. What Mary endured to see the face of her Son, God's Son!

Tonight is a night of happy celebration. Families gather, eating and drinking, laughing, joking, maybe a moment for praying. We all join Mary and Joseph in that moment.

But like Mary we bring much more to this moment. We bring all the aching in our hearts for those who are distanced by miles, distanced by conflicts between us, distanced by death.

We bring our shame, especially to Christmas we bring our shame, memories of a father who drank too much, of poverty, of our indifference for the poor. We bring to this night shame for children who have strayed, failures, weaknesses, stupidity.

Like Mary we come to this night having endured a lot.

But at the moment of his birth we will forget it all. Just to see his life, to see him and look into his eyes, and to love him more than we have ever loved before. As Mary and Joseph did.

Is it worth the pain, the struggle, all that is endured to hear the first cry of a newborn child? Certainly.

That is how it will be for us when we see the one born of Mary. Though our wait to see his face be not nine months but eighty or ninety years, whatever we have endured will be forgotten in the joy of that moment. Our Savior whom Mary bore and whom shepherds saw, our Savior who gave his own life on the cross for you will receive you into eternity and all else will seem as nothing.

Was it worth it to Mary to endure what she did to see the face of Jesus? How could I even ask?

Will it be worth all your faith and love and all you endure to see the face of Jesus when you are born into eternal life? You know it will be.

Remember Mary when shame and pain and loss roll over you and you have nothing to cling to but faith in the only Son of God. Remember how Mary trusted the word of God, be like her in that. And you will know the joy she knew that night so long ago as you see the face of Jesus.