

IMAGINING

an advent lesson



by Valora K Starr

Grandma Betty fascinated me. She was everything and could do anything. Even as a child, I knew clearly that Jesus was her friend. Grandma Betty was always talking about Jesus or to Jesus. I liked watching her when she talked to him.



I don't know when I decided I wanted to be like her—a kind, confident, loving and faithful woman of God—but she was my role model and mentor. Maybe it was the way she gently touched my head and face, like a laying-on-of-hands blessing, or the way she pulled me closer when I approached where she was sitting. She never seemed to mind my interruptions. Her face would light up, as if she'd been waiting for my visit.

Our time together was short. Grandma Betty died when I was 9. Back then, there wasn't much said about death and even less said to children. I waited for Grandma Betty to return and continue our life lessons.

I didn't know then that the lessons would continue for a lifetime.

Waiting for a real baby

During the Advent season when I was 11, I learned about waiting and expecting. My mother was pregnant. I wasn't just waiting for my part in the Sunday school Christmas pageant or for toys. I was waiting for a real baby. As she neared her due date, Mama was placed on bed rest—a challenge with active children and a husband on a military base miles and miles away. This Mama I didn't know. I didn't know what to expect. Normally, when I woke up and when I went to bed, Mama was always up and busy.

One day my mother couldn't stand long enough to make dinner, so she gave me detailed instructions, coaching me from her room as I moved about the kitchen. I ran back and forth getting her approval for each step. This was by no means my first go-round in the kitchen. This was my after-school spot, and when at Grandma's, the place to be. But it was my first time cooking without Mama or Grandma by my side.

After a while, I thought about my new routine. How could I get Mama to trust me to make the meal completely by myself? I felt ready. I could see myself doing it. So I yelled from the kitchen, "I got it!"

When there was no objection from the bedroom, I closed my eyes and imagined. I imagined how Grandma Betty would cup her hand to measure a teaspoon of salt. I thought of how she'd hold her fingers to release a pinch of spice. I imagined everything I would do just like Grandma did, from tying my apron to lifting the lid from the pot and opening the oven door bending slightly at the waist, with my left hand across my chest and my right hand palm up behind my back. And in a soft voice just like Grandma, I would say, "Uh huh," meaning that all was ready.

That Advent, like all Advents that bring the gift of waiting and expecting the baby Jesus, was not passive.

God gives us the gift of imagining, which gives sight to our faith. Seeing Grandma Betty in my mind gave me the confidence and ability to make my family's meal. Imagining what is possible is just the beginning of our work. Mary pondered (imagined God's message in her heart) and then said yes. She was willing to serve, willing to bring the savior Jesus into a world that needs saving. She began by waiting for Jesus.

The gift of imagining allows us, like Mary, to see with our own hearts and minds what God calls us to do. Although it's rarely exactly as we imagine, imagining gives us room to accept our call and trust God, our partner, as we journey together.

This Advent, let us open the gift of imagining. Let's journey with Mary, not merely to recount the story but to enter it. Let's feel and touch our way to saying yes to participating in bringing the savior Jesus to a world in need. Let's begin with the angel Gabriel's visit.

The birth of Jesus foretold

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth . . . 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her."

READ LUKE 1:26–38.

IMAGINE: Gabriel's coming turns Mary's life upside down. She was young, female and without social and economic status, seemingly an unlikely choice, but Gabriel came to Mary, just as he came to Zechariah, and 500 years earlier, Daniel, bringing a message that is still changing the world.

Talk about it

1. **What opportunities to serve are we missing because we are looking at all of the things that seemingly make us unlikely to say yes?**

Season and timing are important parts of God's plan and factors in how well we listen and respond. Mary could have missed the point of Gabriel's visit if she had been focused on age or gender or the other labels that usually stand in our way. Mary's relationship with God was such that she could be honest about her fears and ask questions.

We cannot let how we see ourselves (or how society labels us) cloud or limit our participation in God's promise and plan. From the manger to the empty tomb, Mary trusted God's words, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Talk about it

2. **What looks impossible for us right now? Violence, peace, hunger?**
Remember, we are God's partners in doing God's work.

PONDER: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

3. **What assignment are you ready to accept?**

Mary visits Elizabeth

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country."

READ LUKE 1:39–45.

IMAGINE: Today we can be connected to one person in the next room or thousands around the globe in real time. Yet the sense of urgency we experience on this part of our journey with Mary is almost nonexistent for us today.

Mary was planning a wedding—and preparing to leave the safety of her mother and father's house to go live permanently with Joseph and his family. We have sanitized the dust and heat of the travel and the danger that lurked on the roads between Galilee and Judea. There were no cellphones or social media to document

the journey or to say, “Mom, I arrived safely.” Even though the actual terrain and distance still exist today and would be rough for any teenage girl (even with a cellphone), we discount these obstacles. We value Mary’s haste to begin her mission. Yet the situations and circumstances Mary faced are no less complex than those that challenge our ministries today.

Mary was not alone in completing this mission. Elizabeth, Zechariah, Joseph, the babies and all those unnamed each accepted and participated in fulfilling God’s plan. When we are among the unnamed, we must take care not to confuse the magnitude and impact of the assignment with personal recognition and blessings. We should also never assume that an assignment we accept (or the part that others play) is insignificant to God’s plan.

Instead we can imagine and accept that today, despite a culture of celebrity and a seeing-is-believing mentality, God can and will accomplish God’s plans using ordinary people. Even when we are not the leader, even when we are not named, we are blessed in our yes.

PONDER: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Talk about it

4. What is urgent for you this season?

Mary’s testimony

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.’”

READ LUKE 1:46–55.

IMAGINE: The Magnificat (my soul magnifies) is an all-time favorite for special music during the Advent and

Christmas seasons. These prophetic words are most often referred to as a prayer or a song. Mary and Elizabeth were doing what ordinary people do when everything around them seems unsure—they worshipped.

Our ability to access information on demand has hindered our curiosity to dig deeper into these powerful words that announce the not-yet-but-right-now of Jesus’ mission, even before his birth. Mary’s words seem overwhelming, because we simply cannot see how we can do it. But Mary’s words are a great comfort when one imagines the mystery and trust, the confidence that God will keep God’s promise.

Mary’s testimony to God’s promise gives us the blueprint for God’s plan to continue through us.

PONDER: “Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.”

Talk about it

5. What new hopes for justice and reconciliation will come this season? What will be different for those who misuse and abuse power? What will be different for the hungry?

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home (verse 56). Perhaps the last instruction for our journey is: Stay put for a while, and listen.

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus,

Thank you for giving us examples like that of Grandma Betty. Thank you for the gift of imagining. Help us to stay with you through this Advent season. Prepare us for the coming of Jesus. Prepare us to respond to your call: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Amen. 🌸

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