

Episode: Journey to the Manger with Mary | The First Week of Advent

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

For we have begun this penitential season of Advent. The color is violet and is meant to remind us of our need for penance, for atonement. I'm sure you're looking forward towards Christmas, that great mystery of the birth of Christ, Our Lord, Our Redeemer, he who would change the whole course of humanity. But we have to get ready, and his arrival must also change the course of our own life. It changed the course of humanity, but must change- it must change our soul and our life. I know it can be a busy time, our minds are focused on our numerous obligations - maybe we're a bit stressed with so many demands, perhaps our soul has gotten a bit lethargic. Its' texture has become dense, less malleable, a bit hardened, perhaps, to God's appeals. Well, the liturgy has this marvelous prayer to kind of waken us up. It says this, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come protect us by your mighty strength and save us." That prayer often appears in the first Sunday of Lent, it's called "Stir Up Sunday." There's a tradition where families would mix the ingredients into plum pudding and give it a stir, offering their own personal intentions with every- every stir of the spoon. Those figures that will stir up the batter of our souls during this Advent, well, they were chosen members of the family of God that entered into the salvation history. And each one of these figures played their own unique role. They gave each- they gave- They each gave it a stir, a special churning of God's grace, a kind of swirling and a shaking us up out of our lethargy, our lukewarmness. And these four figures are the ones we want to look at during this time of Advent.

First Mary, then her husband Joseph, then the poor shepherds in the fields, and then finally, the Magi from- from the Orient, who came from afar and- and lined up to adore the newborn king. Each one will give a different nuance to the layers of meaning that we're trying to awaken and stir up during the Advent. Each one has its own- its own taste, its own scent, its own nuance, its flavor, and so how wonderful we can be prepared during this time of- of grace each week we'll look at one of these figures, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, and the Magi, those four hope filled figures in the gospel will stir up our soul during these next few weeks, and each turn of the spoon will bring fresh taste so any spiritual dullness or fatigue that- that has maybe entered into our soul will be dissipated, it will vanish. Maybe by the end, we'll feel younger, more vibrant, rejuvenated, even like on fire for the coming of the child, for no thick sludge, it will be real, really based on these beloved figures that will bring us closer the Child. So you know, there won't be any

artificial flavors, no harmful additives, no artificial or synthetic colors to deal with just this genuine truth that is recorded in the Word of God.

So, of course, we have to start with Mary, Our Blessed Mother. She's the first figure that we want to look at now during- during Advent. Of course, we want to begin with that very mysterious encounter that began it all, the- the Annunciation- the Annunciation of a divine message to Mary of Nazareth. We've all read it before. Luke tells us, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin, betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, to the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary." But we know she was very young, with her whole life ahead of her. She was from the line of David, that means she was from the most famous royal line in his- in Israel's history. But that royal dynasty now seems to be kind of, well dormant in her and people were waiting for a new son of David to restore the kingdom as their prophets had foretold. Now she did not enjoy all the prerogatives of royalty. She wore no crown, no lush garments, but there she was, she lived quietly in her betrothal. She had been committed to Joseph, but she had not yet moved in with him. And then this most wonderful conversation, then- really the most important conversation in history. It began like this, "And he came to her and said, 'Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you.' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.'" And so the angel then goes on to describe with great excitement that this child will actually be on the throne of David. His voice of the angel was peaceful, it was sure, it was tender, it was amazingly- I mean, it was just, like, immensely engaging. And so she's listening to this voice, this celestial creature who opens up God's plan for her, but not just for her own personal life, as though this was about her own self-realization, it was really about this kingdom that will have no end. We picture her there silent, taking in this mystery, this plan, this amazing message. This is like no message had ever been given before. And her response then shows how ready she really was and how she, in fact, she intuited this divine plan all her life, even before the angel had- you know, had actually spoken to her. She had this deep sense, you know, that- that something was up, that God had given her some kind of divine grace, but then in her response, we see how she really needed some clarity, things needed to be lined up.

So she says, this is what we read, the next line, "And Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have no husband?'" Yeah, well, ever since she was presented there in the temple in Jerusalem by her parents, Anna and Joachim, she knew that she had totally dedicated herself to God's plan, body and soul. But she thought, well, how can I be both virgin and mother? Like, how can that happen? These two things don't connect. And then the angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." She thought, okay now- now it falls into place. She will be overshadowed by the power of the Most High, just as she had always been by the Holy Spirit. And the sense of being overshadowed all her life now came into sharp focus. She was now going to become the Ark of the Covenant, the new Ark of the Covenant. This- this precious tabernacle that would hold the Holy of Holies. Now she would carry God made man in her womb, and that now the child will grow in her womb, and that- that child would now need her care, and his pregnant mother now can help us to reflect on how we protect and care for Jesus, growing in our soul, in grace. How we nurture this truth that God dwells in the soul in grace.

This is what we have to do during- during Advent, that you know, the grace of God will dwell in our soul in grace. And we sometimes see images of Mary with the child in our arms, I mean, we see them often, really. In fact, the early Christians were very touched by this image of the divine child in her lap as she points to him and- and he blesses us. That image, that type of icon, was called the in Greek, the holy *Hodegetria*,

that is, she's the one who presents us the way of salvation. She's kind of like pointing at him. Her hand is kind of open, it's not clear if he is blessing us, or if he's just like grabbing her fingers or something, or her hand. And typically, the Child Jesus holds a scroll, symbolizing that he's the divine wisdom. And Mary is usually adorned with a veil that was called the *maphorion*. This veil with stars on her shoulders and on her forehead. This veil symbolizing her perpetual virginity. You know that that virginity of hers is- is part of her total dedication. Her whole soul and her body is dedicated to the Incarnation, because she is the Mother of God.

Well, Mary will guide us during this time of Advent. She'll reinvigorate us with this desire for total- like total dedication. Even through all that business that we have, maybe even through all that stress, she gently guides us to him. You know, some of these icons were so revered in ancient times that they were considered to be literally like miraculous objects, you know. I picture monks kneeling and singing in these ancient monasteries of old and even lay people gazing at her and kind of like following her lead, and that after this, their lives were like transformed as they prayed in front of these beautiful icons, and they felt that Mary really interceded for them. Some of them would have been healed from health issues, other ones would it be maybe they would have been drawn out of their lukewarmness, maybe their- their own lethargy. And we too, have to have recourse to our- our mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. And certainly, images or icons can help us a lot as we prepare for Advent.

You know, I have in my room an old print of this Polish Madonna, Our Lady of Czestochowa, the Black Madonna of Czestochowa which, in fact, I still remember carefully framing this image in the early 1980s, about 1984 when I installed this image in the priest's room in a center of Opus Dei in Toronto. Now that priest was very fond of this image, and I know that he would kneel in front of it before going to bed. And while that priest has now passed away, well now he sees Our Lord face to face, and he sees our mother also. And now I get to do that prayer in front of that image that Our Lady of Czestochowa, because now I've inherited that room and that image. And you know, that image has always impacted me, because perhaps you have seen that- that image, that specific image of Our Lady of Czestochowa, that there are these two prominent slash marks on her right cheek. And I looked this up, why she have these slash marks? Well, apparently they were caused by an attack when these Hussite soldiers plundered the Jasna Góra monastery in Poland. It seems they tried to- well, they tried to attack it, but then, I don't know, somehow this image was saved, and then later on, they tried to paint over these scars, but somehow they weren't able to cover them up. But these gashes now are part of her mystique. They somehow contribute to her beauty. Yes, it's true, she looks rather serious, but she's a mother protecting her child, and she's also our mother, and so she's also protecting us. She's ready to take a blow over her children, and we must really feel her mediation during this time of Advent, a mediation that will encourage us out of our own lethargy, our own lukewarmness.

And so for us, this is a time to imitate her with a kind of deeper sense of hope, maybe a sense of vigilance we must learn from the Blessed Virgin Mary and how to take care of our soul, just like she took care of the baby in utero, in her womb, and it's how he grows and develops within her. And she had to take care of the baby Jesus. And we, too, we have to take care of the baby Jesus. We have to take care of Our Lord, especially when we receive him in the Eucharist. And we receive Jesus in us, and we know that he will kind of renew our soul, invigorate our faith, strengthen our trust in God, strengthen our very mission here on Earth. I think Mary would have been giving thanks for that child that she held in her womb. And we, too, during this Advent, can take special care of our time of Thanksgiving, special care. And they say- you know, they say that pregnant women, they have to be very careful of their diet during their pregnancy, because it's a very delicate time, and there's certain things they can't take alcohol and things like that. And we ask

ourselves now, what can our diet be during this time of Advent? Maybe it can be like a like a diet of aspirations, maybe frequent glances at her image, like at those icons. Maybe we can even have a small little image like, I don't know, in our in our wallet. Many people have little screen savers on their- on their phone, nice little image of Our Lady as we open our phone. Probably we open it pretty often, so we see her often, and we can well invoke her and ask her to protect the Lord Jesus in our soul that is to mediate for us.

St. Josemaria always wanted each room in our homes in the center of Opus Dei to have an image of Our Lady. Sometimes an icon, maybe a statue, sometimes something, maybe more modern, a modern reproduction, so that when we were to walk into that room, we could make an act of love and entrust our cares to her. And that will help us keep the presence of God, which is also the presence of our- the Blessed Mother. In some ways, we will feel protected by her maternal mantle. Often we see also images of Our Lady wearing this, this mantle, and- and people under- underneath- under her mantle, feeling that she is protecting them. St. Josemaria said these very endearing words in a meditation in 1970, he said, "If she holds her son Jesus in her right arm, then I, who am also her child, will have a place there too. The Mother of God will take me with her arm and press us both to her heart." So Mary, as we prepare this time of Advent, we ask you to press us close to your heart and your Sacred Heart as an act of intercession, as an act of mediation, so that we feel close to you we experience your mediation- mediation that will lead us to really protect the love of God in our soul, a good diet of aspirations, maybe gazes at the Eucharist, gazes at- at the cross of Jesus and at our Blessed Mother. The mediation of Our Mother will protect us during this Advent.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.