

Have You Tried Praying About It?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, (20 Dec), 2009.

Text: Luke 1:37 “*For with God nothing will be impossible.*”

For my text this morning I return to the encounter of Mary and the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation, just prior to the verses of this morning’s lesson. Mary had asked Gabriel how what he told her about pregnancy could happen, given her unmarried status and virginity. He reminded her that her kinswoman Elizabeth was thought to be barren but, now, she, too, had conceived a child with a divine purpose. Then he said, “With God nothing will be impossible.”¹ It is, Craddock said, “*the creed behind all creeds.*”² It affirms God’s absolute sovereignty to change things according to the divine will, no matter how impossible they appear to be. Though God can do anything without us, God chooses to work through the faith of human beings. This in a nutshell is Mary’s glory.

What I want to tell you is not on a Christmas story, but like all good Christmas stories, this one will tug at your heart. There is a connection with Mary before it ends. The story concerns something that happened in Iraq. In years to come the Battle for Fallujah will go down in history as one of the greatest moments of the US Marine Corps, as heroic as Iwo Jima. This is one of the hidden stories from those dark days of 2005-06, hidden like the story of the Miriam, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, John and Jesus. I learned the story because I know the chaplain, Fr. Marc Bishop of Chelmsford, MA, not far from where my wife Cyndi grew up in Andover. He was mobilized with the 25th Marines during that time.³ Fallujah is in Al Anbar Province, where I was just last December. By 2008 it had been pacified but two years before, Fallujah was one horrible place, where people did things to one another best not mentioned in a pulpit. But in the midst of wars there are also acts of incredible human kindness and miracles of God. This is such a story.

The first person you need to know is Chris Walsh—he was a Navy Corpsman serving with Chaplain Bishop in 2006. Walsh grew up in St. Louis in an Irish Catholic family. After high school, unlike his other friends, Walsh didn’t go to college. Instead he took a trip across the country until he ran out of money in San Francisco. From there he called his mother Maureen and came back home. In the fall that year he enrolled in an EMT course and began working on the streets of St. Louis, enjoying his work in an ambulance, but lamenting to his mother that there were too many wasted hours between the real emergency calls. After the Sept. 11th attacks, Walsh joined the Navy. His father had been a Marine in Vietnam and his brother Patrick was already in Iraq. Walsh at thirty years old, like many reservists, was older than most in his unit. Because of his experience as an EMT, he was often the go-to guy for special cases. Frequently on patrol in Fallujah in the big Humvees, Walsh would see an injured Iraqi on the street and get

¹ Luke 1:37

² Craddock, Fred B. Luke. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 28

³ To read the entire story, see the article by Kevin Cullen in the Boston Globe.
http://boston.com/news/world/articles/2006/12/04/saving_baby_mariam.

the Marines to stop. Several had to set up perimeter security while Walsh set up impromptu street clinics to treat the injured.

On a routine patrol in June, an IED exploded in the road in front of the vehicle Walsh was in. The Marines jumped out and looked for the triggerman, a terrorist with a cell phone to set off the explosion. They saw him on a rooftop, then on the ground making his escape through the warren of ramshackle houses in the city. They went door to door searching for the fellow. Walsh, though a medical corpsman, was also armed. At the door of one house a woman emerged from a room with her baby saying, over and over, “*Baby! Baby sick!*” Walsh put his rifle down and took a look. Though he had seen horrible sights on the streets of St. Louis and in Al Anbar, he had never seen anything like this. The child only months old had been born with her bladder outside her body. He took photos to show his unit’s medical officer, CAPT Sean Donovan from Boston. When Dr. Donovan saw the photos he told Walsh that she had bladder exstrophy, a condition that would be fatal to the baby without medical attention, something unavailable in a million years in Fallujah. Walsh immediately launched a campaign to get the child out. The baby’s name was Mariam, the Arabic cognate of the Hebrew Miriam, and the English, Mary.

At the time 5,000 other Iraqis wanted out, and Mariam’s case stalled in a mountain of red tape. But the Marines were hopeful. Walsh found another Marine, Mike Henderson from Maine, whose nephew had had the same condition and was treated by Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Dr. Donovan found that Dr. Rafael Pieretti was there and one of the few in the US who specialized in the corrective surgery for this condition. Fr. Bishop contacted Christopher Anderson at his St. Mary’s Church back in Chelmsford who was president of the Massachusetts High Technology Council. Anderson started collecting pledges to pay for baby Mariam and her family to come to Boston. The hospital and surgeon agreed to take the case pro bono. “We had everything lined up,” Dr. Donovan said, “but couldn’t get the permission to get her out of Iraq.”

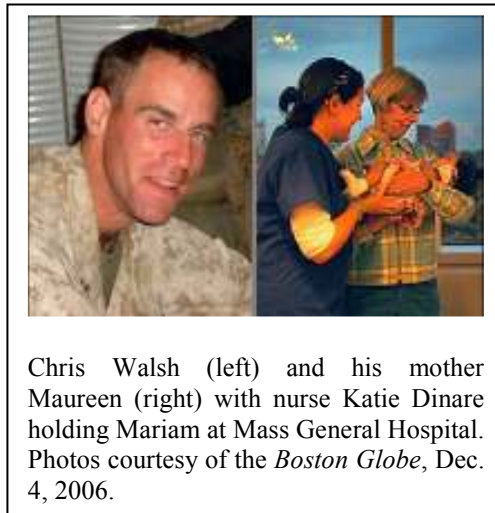
In the meantime Walsh and Donovan and several Marines would make a weekly and nightly trip to Mariam’s house to treat her, to try to protect her from infection. To do this they traveled different routes each week. And, again, several Marines provided security around the house while Mariam was seen by Walsh and Donovan.

Then on Labor Day, September 4th, on a routine patrol not far from Mariam’s house, another IED took out a Humvee, killing three Marines. One of them was Chris Walsh. A few weeks later, this unit Marines would leave theater. During their deployment the 25th had lost 11 members of the battalion and 83 had been wounded. They decided the best thing to do to honor Walsh was to get baby Mariam to Boston for her surgery. They pushed some more but still the case was bogged down.

Other Marines took Walsh’s place in the nightly trips to the baby’s house to care for her, not telling Mariam’s family what happened to Walsh. In the last week of their time in Al Anbar, Dr. Donovan despaired that they would get the baby out. He stopped by for a visit to Fr. Bishop. The priest asked the doctor, “Have you prayed about it?” Donovan admitted he had not, so the two went to the small dusty chapel next to the chaplain’s office and said the *Memorare*, a prayer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, which in part reads, “Never was it known that anyone who fled to you for protection, implored your help or sought your intercession, was left unaided.” Sean

Donovan and Marc Bishop knelt down and said a Christian prayer for a Muslim girl. The next day, Donovan opened an e-mail notifying him that Mariam had been cleared for medical evacuation to Boston.

When Mariam and her grandparents got to Mass General, everything worked wonderfully that the Marines had arranged. Dr. Pieretti's surgery was successful and immediately the little girl began to gain weight and thrive. Dr. Donovan called Walsh's mother to tell her about what her son had accomplished and how his friends had chosen to honor his memory. Maureen Walsh decided then and there to fly to Boston so she could see Mariam. I have two photos of Walsh and one of his mother holding Mariam, which if you look for my sermon on our website this week you'll be able to see for yourself.



When Mariam's grandfather met Maureen Walsh at the hospital he said to her, in Arabic, "Thank you for your son. This was an act of God. *Allah* sent Chris. To Mariam. So she will live." Walsh's mother agreed as she held the baby. "There are too many coincidences for it to be a coincidence," she said. "Chris was waiting all his whole life for something like this." Then as the Marine's mother gazed into Mariam's eyes and stroked the baby's hair, she said, "Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?"

"For with God, nothing shall be impossible," the Archangel told Mary. Though it must have seemed impossible, that God could become a human being, through the faith and willingness of a young Galilean woman, it did happen. It happened both because God willed it and because Mary agreed to bear the child. Isn't it a miracle that her child still saves children, even children in war torn, seemingly God-forsaken places like Fallujah in 2006? If you wonder in the busy-ness of your life if God can help in some impossible circumstance, I ask you again, Chaplain Bishop's question, *"Have you tried praying about it?"*

End

Have You Tried Praying Advent 4.DOC