Because Christmas falls on a Monday this year, we get an incredibly quick gestation. This morning in our readings for Advent IV we hear the Angel say to Mary, “now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” and tomorrow, which we celebrate tonight, we will hear, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.” I assume most women who have gone through the traditional nine months of pregnancy would prefer this speedier version. However, just because a quirk of the calendar races through Mary’s pregnancy that does not make it unimportant. I mean it was important enough that it occupied much of the discussion at the third Church council, the one at Ephesus called by Emperor Theodosius II in 431. So, let’s talk about that for a minute because I am sure it is why you showed up today.

At the Council of Ephesus there were three major things that were done. Four, if you count reaffirming the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed but that was more administrative in nature so I will stick with three. The first thing they did was to condemn Nestorianism which was a heresy perpetuated by a guy named Nestorius. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople from 428 to 431 and argued against the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures in favor of a prosopic union of those two natures. If you want to know more about that we can have lunch sometime and discuss it. The second thing the Council did was condemn Pelagianism, which was of course named after Pelagius who was an ascetic and philosopher from the British Isles who lived from 355 to around 420. Pelagius argued that there was no original sin and that Adam and Eve were just bad role models. So, in order to be united with God we just needed to try really hard and not act like them. Again, we can talk about Pelagianism over lunch if you want to know more. But today I really want to focus on the third decision made at that Council and that was to give Mary the title of *Theotokos*. Before I go on to explain what this term means and why we should care I need to address the conspiracy minded out there. When I say they decided on this title it does not mean they invented something. That is, they did not get together and make something up rather they clarified something that had been there all along. Think of it like this. In late 1609 or early 1610 Galileo discovered four of Jupiter’s moons, he did not create them. They had been there the whole time. All that he did was observe them. So, when we say the council came up with the term *Theotokos* they simply explained something that had been there the whole time. Okay so now to my point and an explanation of the term *Theotokos.*

*Theotokos* is often translated from Greek to mean God-bearer. Which is a pretty good translation but it is probably better translated as “she who gave birth to one who was God.” While I realize this does not exactly roll right off the tongue, it does start to give us a sense of just who Mary was and is. She is the one who carried God in her womb. I think in the Protestant world of which we have inherited much in the Episcopal Church there is a tendency to under-emphasize Mary. This is largely a reaction to what many Protestants see as an over-emphasis of Mary by the Roman Catholics. But this under-emphasis really seems to be an example of cutting off our nose to spite our face. Mary is a really big deal, and we should remember that. There is no way you can look at the Gospels and come away with any other conclusion. And it is not just the Gospels. If you look at the Nicene Creed, which we will say in a few minutes, there are only two humans mentioned – Pontius Pilate and the Virgin Mary. One is infamous and the other is Mary. So why is this? What exactly makes her so special? Let me try and explain.

Today’s reading from the Old Testament tries to get at something of Mary’s importance, albeit in a roundabout way. The reading is about King David and his desire to build a temple. As the story proceeds, we find out that God vetoes David’s idea but in so doing God clarifies something by asking, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.” For you see in the Old Testament God’s presence was found in the Ark which was kept in a tent or tabernacle. In this, we see a parallel with Mary in that David wanted to construct a place for God to dwell but God rejects it whereas in Mary we have a place where God of his own freewill has chosen to dwell. The idea is the same – God will dwell somewhere. But in one instance it is a human telling God where He should reside but with Mary it is God choosing the place where He will dwell. And, of course, the place he chooses is a person and that person is Mary. Here is another way to think about it. On the façade of the Notre Dame in Paris there is a statue of Mary and above that statue there is a depiction of the Ark of the Covenant. The symbolism is that Mary is the ark of the covenant, she is the place where God dwells. For, if you remember back to 1st Kings when God allows for Solomon to build the Temple, when it is finished we read, “Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house.” That is Mary. The nine months that we cover in a few minutes today tell us about the only human who provided a house for God to live in. It was for Mary as the poet John Donne says, “Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.”

This is one reason why the gestation of Jesus is such a big deal, but just like an infomercial there is more. Not only did Mary provide a place for God to dwell but she did something else. As Christians we believe that God came to earth, but there is nothing particularly unique about this claim. Pagan gods came to earth fairly regularly – some even lived on the earth on the tops of mountains and such. The Christian claim is something much different and much stranger. We claim that God not only came to earth but that while he was here, he was also fully human – fully man and fully God as we say. And here comes the other really big deal about Mary; she is half of this equation. The “fully God” part obviously came from God but the “fully man” part came from Mary. If you want it in terms of the Nicene Creed the Son of God was “made incarnate from the Virgin Mary.”

And let me finish with one more symbol that we see with Mary and that is the burning bush. If you remember the story of the burning bush, you may remember that the bush was burning yet it was not consumed. This tells us something about God that we also see in Mary. When God interacts with his creation, He is subtle. He is there and yet he does not destroy. Mary carried in her womb the Son of God and yet she remained fully Mary. She was not destroyed or altered in the process. This tells us that God does not come to destroy but to make us more like what we are supposed to be. He wants to restore humanity not wipe it off the face of the earth and start anew. And so as we finish up our last few hours of preparation before the coming of Jesus let us thank God for coming and thank God for Mary who when told that she would provide a home for the Son of God replied, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”