

SLD07.09.06 14th Ordinary Mary, Mother of God
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:46-55
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“Hail, Mary...On the Move”

By now you've probably figured out that today's service is dedicated to Mary, Mother of Jesus. In case you think you took a wrong turn and ended up at a Catholic mass, let me explain how it happens that our worship today focuses on the person, ministry and message of Mother Mary.

Each summer, I preach a series on Christian saints so we might learn something not only about Christian history but about certain individuals embedded in that history who were especially effective at living out the gospel. Since our tradition is not especially keen on saints, always I begin by reminding us of our Reformed perspective on the fundamental brokenness of humanity, the role of Jesus Christ as sole intermedator, and the priesthood of all believers. Anchored by these understandings, then, we examine together the lives and works of various Christian witnesses, past and present, for the purpose of jump-starting our imaginations as we seek to integrate gospel imperatives in our own lives.

So far we've been introduced to St. Teresa, that grand, 16th century wild woman of Avila whose passion for God practically leaps from the pages of her biography; and to St. John of the Cross, whose insights about the mysterious, indirect blessings of the dark night of the soul offers us solace in our own sufferings. Today I decided to jump centuries back to a scriptural figure who, despite “a skein of appearances longer and more strategically placed than those of any other character in the Gospels besides

Jesus,”¹ is largely ignored in the Protestant tradition – the one known by Catholics as St. Mary, Mother of God.

I take up Mary’s case today not only because through the tale of her treatment over the ages we can learn something about ourselves and our tradition, but also because, in my view, Mary’s disposition and actions continue to model for us both the risks and the choices associated with Christian discipleship.

In our scripture readings this morning from the gospel of Luke, we heard first the familiar Christmas story in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary her divine destiny, to which she replies “No way!” Gabriel, of course, says “Way!” And in the end, Mary faithfully says, “okay.” It’s the same story we hear on the fourth Sunday of every Advent, that one day of the liturgical year we Protestants nod to Jesus’ mom and thank her for her cooperation.

Presbyterian author Kathleen Norris makes note of the limited attention span we Protestants have for Mary: “We unpack her from the box at Christmastime,” says Norris, “and then pack her back up again, with all our other decorations, after the holidays are over.”²

The primary reason for what some call our “sullen neglect of the Virgin”³ is that, while we Protestants grant Mary her indisputable place as the mother of Jesus, we have been inclined for the last 300 years to regard “any additional enthusiasm as tantamount to ‘mariolatry,’” or the idolatry of Mary; the (heretical) elevation of Mary to a status approaching Christ’s.”⁴

¹“Hail, Mary.” *Time Magazine*, March 21, 2005.p. 63.

² A New Look at Mary,” *Presbyterians Today*, April 2004.

³ *Time Magazine*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

It all started back in 431 CE at the council of Ephesus. You recall – that church council that tackled the nature of Jesus and Jesus’ relationship with God and came up with the language of the Trinity? Remember that one of the big issues was the authenticity of Jesus’ humanity? Well, one of the ways the council went about establishing Jesus’ authentic humanity was to declare him born of a human woman, Mary, whom the church fathers affirmed as the Theotokos, or Mother of God. At the time the emphasis was much less on Mary’s virginity than on her humanity, and more importantly, through her, on *Jesus’* humanity. “God’s taking on human flesh became far less abstract when one discussed his human mother and the actual fact of his birth.”⁵

But over time, Mary’s role grew in the minds and hearts of worshippers. Monks meditating on Christ’s sufferings began to regard Mary as a sort of super co-sufferer, later dubbed Mater Dolorosa. Other titles accrued to Mary: “Queen of Heaven, Bride of Christ, Mother of Mercy,” and, most offensive to 16th century reformers, humanity’s Merciful Mediator. Remember the reformed emphasis on the role of Jesus Christ as sole intermediator? At the same time, what with the medieval emphasis on Christ as the harsh arbiter of Judgment Day, believers sought *somebody* who could help them before the condemnation of a stern and frightening God. “...Folk piety left doctrine in the dust to the point that believers began to intone ‘Our Mother who art in heaven....’ Horrified reformer Philipp Melancthon remarked in the 1500s that ‘in popular estimation, the Blessed Virgin has replaced Christ!’”⁶

And so, in defense of God’s sovereignty and the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ, our reforming forefathers proceeded to cut Mary out of the equation entirely. As

⁵ Ibid., p. 63

⁶ Ibid. p. 64

John Buchanan, pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church commented, "Mary was a kind of point person for Catholicism so she took the biggest hit." All of which leads to the unfortunate if amusing truth of Harvard professor Peter Gomes' joke about Jesus receiving a Protestant theologian at the pearly gates and making appropriate introductions: "Ah, Professor," says Jesus. "I know you have met my father, but I don't believe you know my mother."

But, as always, times are changing. A resurgence of interest in early church practices as well as the increasing volume of feminist commentary among Catholics and Protestants alike have resulted in lively renewal of focus and exploration of the figure of Mary. The title of George Tavard's book, The Thousand Faces of Mary, reflects the fact that "Mary" is now and always has been a collective noun,⁷ attracting and accruing myriad interpretations through the centuries usually reflecting the socio-political agendas of their day. Some interpretations offered women, in particular, a sense of companionship with Mary, a source of inspiration, comfort and strength in times of trial. But others did harm by assuring that women stayed in their religiously sanctioned position as subordinate to patriarchal authority.

But today, says Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson in her book Truly our Sister, "...women for the first time in history are publicly and corporately interpreting the figure of Mary from the perspective of their own struggle to be independent, strong, lively, and holy, that is, from their option for full human dignity."⁸ New, more spiritually empowering, ethically challenging and socially liberating interpretations of Mary are emerging. Longstanding patriarchal spins on Mary as the idealized submissive,

⁷ quote from Els Maeckelberghe

⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, Truly Our Sister, p. 6.

obedient, inviolate female are being questioned and reworked. Impatience is expressed with the historical (male) glorification of Mary's virginity and its implication that ordinary sex is somehow sullyng and not a great gift from God. Others reject the notion that Mary freely offered her son for the salvation of the world, willingly joining in a divine plan for the suffering of her son.⁹

Even in the Reformation tradition, whose landscape offers few strong female images, women like you and I are beginning to turn to Mary as an object of identification, noting her courage, her strength, her independent choice to become not just a vessel but a co-creator of God's beginnings. In their book, Blessed One, Protestant Perspectives on Mary, theologians Beverly Gaventa and Cynthia Rigby note that the time has come for Protestants to join in the blessing of Mary,¹⁰ not just as woman and mother but as disciple, prophet and exemplar of faith. Echoing the assertions of all Hebrew prophets, the Mary of the Magnificat sings of the chaotic reversals and new order of the coming of God's Kingdom – the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, the lowly are lifted, the hungry are fed, the rich sent away empty. Mary at the Cross witnesses a courage and determination to stand with Jesus unparalleled by his other disciples. And Mary, the chosen Bearer of God, models the expectant relationship between ordinary believers like you and I and the God who seeds the revolution of redemption within us. Indeed, "to call Mary 'blessed' is to recognize the blessedness of ordinary people who are called to participate in the extraordinary."¹¹

⁹ Ibid, p.

¹⁰ Beverly Gavanta and Cynthia Rigby, Blessed One, Protestant Perspectives On Mary, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2002, p.1.

¹¹ Ibid., p.5.

Here, then, are the most powerful insights and challenges the figure of Mary offers me today: the mystery and wonder of God's partnership with humanity in the redemption of creation, as well as our responsibility for participation in God's plan. The subtle but inescapable seed of possibility God sows in each one of us, in all our particularity, in all our *peculiarity*, with full expectation of our cooperation with its growth and development. The difficulty we all have with growing and developing the image of God in ourselves, as though on our own we simply can't get past the labor pains. Still, what I learn from Mary is that despite our limitations, God sows in each of one us the coming of the Kingdom, with all its chaotic reversals and new order that so disrupts business as usual, and expects, even depends on, our partnership.

So I think to myself...hmmm...what do you suppose that looks like these days for me? What do you suppose God is trying to seed in me at this time in my life when what delights me, what feeds me and what drains me dry has become so appallingly and urgently apparent?

Or, for that matter, what is God trying to seed in you? What part of our infinite, universal God has been sown in finite, particular you, to be nurtured and tended and grown to completion through your life? What aspect of God's kingdom has the existential, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, political, social, and economic package of "you" been assigned to bear to the world? I think at some level each of us *knows*. Certainly hints abound in the grace and pain of our lives, in both the responsibility and the numbing isolation of our abundance, in both the comforting safety and the repetitive challenges of our relationships, in both the stunning, breathing beauty of our living earth and the inexorable, inescapable clamor of our broken world. However much we may

reject or resist our “assignment,” we are, every one of us, called, just as Mary was, to grow and nurture what God seeds within us, that we might bear our image of God to the world.

It’s just hard to pull off. There’s a lot going against a healthy delivery of the divine. Adequate, authentic pre-natal care is hard to come by. Few of us slow down or pay attention enough to what’s growing inside us. And anyway, not everybody wants to fool with a newborn, God’s or anybody else’s. They’re a lot of work. Demand a lot of energy. Disrupt schedules. Make for chaotic days and sleepless nights. And that’s before they’re teenagers.

Most of us would just as soon God limit God’s seeding to young, unsuspecting, 1st century Jewish girls, thank you very much. But what I know from Mary is that God seeds all God’s seekers. And all God’s seeking communities, as well.

So what do you suppose God is seeding here at Emory Church? Something. I can feel it, can’t you? God is up to something here. God seeded something here, maybe a long time ago, maybe even at the birth of this church, that feels now like it’s beginning to take new shape. Only I don’t know what it is, can’t name it yet. Can you? I can feel it...in my impatience with church as usual, in *your* impatience with church as usual, in all our yearning for something more in our relationship with God, something less in the busyness of the church. But I can’t get my arms around it, can’t hold and rock it yet, can’t feed or tend it, ‘cause I’m not sure yet what it is!

How exactly God is “overshadowing” Emory Church these days puzzles me, unnerves me a bit. The way is not sure, the consequences unclear. New life brings change and change brings death, which is why we don’t like change.

But Gabriel tells us not to be afraid because we've found favor with God. Gabriel tells us we'll conceive what God has seeded in us, no worries. That we'll bear what God intends us to bear because of God's Kingdom there will be no end.

"No way!" says you, says I. We're Presbyterians! We don't go for unsafe sex, divine or otherwise, never mind all that crazy kingdom talk.

"Way!" says Gabriel, "for the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and what is born of you will be holy, for nothing will be impossible with God."

And how shall we at Emory Church respond to God's promising but uninvited seed? In the end, proud, brave Mary said, "okay." Said, 'here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" What, in the end, shall we say?

To the glory of God. Amen.