

Feast of Mary

Let It Be

Luke 1:46-55

Before your pastor left on paternity leave he asked me if I was comfortable using the lessons for the Feast Day of Mary, the mother of Jesus, today. He noted that it is the custom here that when a feast day falls on a Sunday to observe the feast. When Brad posed the question to me today was two months away and I have been raised to be polite so I crossed my fingers and said, "Sure I'm comfortable with preaching on Mary." Of course, having been raised Lutheran from birth, nothing about this task makes me "comfortable". Growing up in the South where Lutherans were a miniscule minority of churchgoers, and associated by some with Catholicism, I knew that when asked if Lutherans were some form of "Catholics" to deny this as vehemently as Peter denied Jesus. As a result, you can imagine that growing up Mary was pretty much off my radar screen. Other than a prize role girls wanted to play in the Christmas pageant, Mary was little understood or even considered by most of us.

In 2015, National Geographic Magazine named Mary, the mother of Jesus, "the most powerful woman in the world" as an appraisal of her ongoing influence and popularity. In their cover article, the writers noted that since 40 A.D. there have been over 2,000 sightings of the Virgin Mary and since the 1500s the Roman Catholic church has verified many of them to be associated with miracles. Countless works of art and music have been created featuring Mary. Yet perhaps, like me, you wonder, do Mary's words and example have any chance of being heard and effecting change in our lives and our world?

A major theme of Luke's Gospel is placing the stories of Jesus' life in a larger historical context. When Luke introduces John the Baptist, the Gospel reading began: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness." It's not just for the sake of dating certain events that Luke gives us this background. His point is to draw a contrast between God's power and human power. The list Luke gives of earthly rulers—the ones who represent the power in the world into which John the Baptist and Jesus were born—is deliberately juxtaposed with the word of God coming to John, the bizarre prophet in the wilderness, who is calling on people to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Likewise, Mary, the subject of today's Gospel reading, is even more insignificant than John in the eyes of the powerful. Engaged, but not yet married, she is a young peasant girl to whom an angel proclaims that she will give birth to God's own Son. "How can this be?" asks Mary, knowing full well that being pregnant before marriage is grounds for Joseph, her betrothed, to walk away from her, leaving her an unwed mother and an outcast. The angel convinces her that God himself will be the father of her child and tells her that Elizabeth, her elderly cousin who was thought to be barren, is also with child. The angel concludes this news

by saying, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary responds, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

It’s tempting to question whether the exact circumstances of Elizabeth and Mary are factually correct. After all, both stories are, to 21st century minds, implausible if not impossible. But Brian McLaren asks, “What if the purpose of these stories is to challenge us to blur the line between what we think is possible and what we think is impossible? Could we ever come to a time when swords would be beaten into plowshares? When the predatory people in power—the lions—would lie down in peace with the vulnerable and the poor--the lambs? When God’s justice would flow like a river—to the lowest and most ‘god-forsaken’ places on Earth?” What if the point of Mary’s song, the Magnificat, is that you and I will experience life in all its fullness by aligning our lives around the “impossible” promises of God?

In the Magnificat, we hear Mary’s witness of faith. Mary sings of a different world. Of a world where the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. Where the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. Where God remembers his promises and acts in mercy to deliver his people.

Mary sings of a world she had never known. She knew about being lowly and may have even known what it is like to be hungry. Despite her circumstances, Mary sings that the world has already changed. Mary sings of the world the way God sees the world—the way God reveals the world to be in the life of Jesus Christ. She gets her verb tenses all mixed up because she is so caught up in seeing the world as God sees it.

Oftentimes I feel too small and insignificant to stand up to the many problems that seem so overwhelming. Maybe you do, too. There’s no shortage of paths that need to be straightened and rough places that need to be smoothed. It can be really tempting, given the powers that be, not just the political ones, but also the deeply personal ones, to feel defeated and want nothing more than to avoid our feelings—through food, TV, shopping, sex, mood altering chemicals, finding fault with others-- anything, absolutely anything, that will distract us, if only for a few brief moments.

But you know, and I know, that denial can’t turn our hearts in a new direction or prepare us for Christ’s coming. We won’t get there by avoiding whatever is going on within us or within our world. Nor do we get there by attempting to tackle all our problems in one huge leap. We can take our cue from the Gospel where small, seemingly insignificant things and people create lasting change—a mustard seed, an odd prophet in the wilderness, a helpless baby born in obscurity to a young mother. Remember the worldly powerful guys who Luke took such special pains to mention when he introduced John the Baptist? As the centuries passed they became mere historical footnotes while Jesus, whose origins were humble, ended up forever changing human history.

So I invite you to take heart. Don't think you are too small to make a difference, too insignificant to participate with God in the mending of creation. Like Mary, think about what steps you can take to prepare the way of the Lord.

Mary teaches us about trust in the face of conditions that seem to defy God's salvation. We shouldn't minimize what her walk of faith was like and the courage she possessed. Waiting is hard work. Waiting for a baby to be born. Waiting for good news. Waiting for the final fulfillment of God's promises in this very broken world. But the story and song of Mary reminds us, in the midst of our waiting, that every earthly power is passing away. What remains is that helpless infant for whom we wait in confidence because we know how the story ends. We know that he will grow up, share our human suffering, rise from the dead, and reign as the Prince of Peace who will never, ever, leave us, even unto the end of time.

Krister Stendahl, the Lutheran Bishop of Sweden and noted New Testament scholar, said that no man should ever preach on the Advent readings related to Mary because no man can understand the depth of Mary's experience. With this in mind, my former boss asked his wife, a Roman Catholic laywoman, to preach in Advent one year. Let me close with her words about Mary's importance for our walk of faith.

"For Mary, bearing God involved uncertainty and pain, and required much patience, time, and effort. For us, bearing God will involve and require all those things as well, (- uncertainty and pain; patience, time, and effort-) though perhaps not in quite the same forms. Bearing God for Mary meant that she gave herself up to being a channel through which God's compassion and mercy could flow into the world. And that is what we, too, must do as God-bearers, for it is only through us that the world will know Christ – or not."

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