



We Lutherans are not always the best at talking about Mary. She manages to creep in during the Advent and Christmas seasons, but it's almost as if we would much rather keep her on the back burner the rest of the year, lest we get too close to becoming like our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ, who we insist that they obsess over Mary. Nevertheless, one way we Lutherans have grown accustomed to Mary over time is back in the good 'ole days when we had those most precious Christmas pageants.

Those youth-led beloved performances, which oftentimes felt that they miraculously came together one Sunday morning in December after weeks of the most chaotic rehearsals imaginable for the directors and other adult volunteers. One of the stresses was always coming up with an actual cast, including which girl would be Mary. She may not have had as many lines as the shepherds or the magi or other random characters in the play, but it was always nice if the chosen girl could exhibit some form of calm and peace amidst the chaos of all the other wondering children around the make-shift stage.

I remember one girl, "Holly," from my class who was asked to fill the famous role. Some of these pageant directors for churches were notorious for seeking out the popular girls to put them center stage, but "Holly" was not exactly that in our small-town school. She didn't have the best grades. But, honestly, there were not too many girls in my Sunday school class, so she basically became Mary by default anyway.

And yet, looking back on "Holly's" time when she was sitting next to an acting-Joseph and holding a baby doll as a substitute Jesus, I find her role to be rather fitting, after all. Because, I like to think Mary was also not the most popular girl in her town. I like to think she wasn't the smartest one of them all, intellectually or otherwise. I like to think she knew first-hand the chaos and struggles and pain and anguish of us not-always-at-our best mere mortals. And let's just say this young girl who portrayed her for some random Christmas play decades ago, turned out to know far too well the chaos and the struggles and the pain and anguish that this life can throw at us mere mortals without any notice whatsoever. "Holly" ended up getting a closer connection with Mary long after she was wearing some make-shift blue draping in front of a church altar just before Christmas.

It all started on a random morning in the small town where we grew up. "Holly" had moved to Columbus, where so many of my class seemed to go, but her parents were still at the same home where she and her brother grew up throughout their younger years. Her mother had made some significant changes in her diet and exercise to improve her quality of life. "Holly" was so proud of her. And then, that one morning, her father found her mom on the living room floor. A heart attack quickly stole her life at 55 years young. "Holly" got to know the pain and anguish this life can throw at us without any notice whatsoever.

And then, only a couple years later, “Holly,” herself, was on the receiving-end of the most tragic news for her quality of life in her mid-30’s. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. It wasn’t fair. That’s not supposed to happen to girls who played Mary for a Christmas pageant less than two decades before. “Holly” got to experience what must have been a terrifying time for Mary when her life was thrown at a tailspin. However, “Holly” also followed in the footsteps of the woman she portrayed before a bunch of people in the pews: the woman who managed to proclaim hope and love and compassion to the world, all of it in spite of her own fear and despair.

You see, “Holly” ended up taking a job helping children finding loving foster families. And then, she was hired to work for a company that puts events together that are slightly bigger than those beloved Christmas pageants: from weddings to other kinds of banquets. Except, she heads up the essential part of the business giving back to the community. The food that is not used by the guests ends up going to local food banks to help feed those in impoverished conditions. The left-behind flowers will go to local nursing homes to brighten residents’ days who may have no family or friends coming by otherwise. She also takes part in providing Thanksgiving meals and toy drives for children of the nearby neighborhoods.

So, I have a feeling “Holly” turned out to be a living Mary, after all, because it wasn’t the chaos and the struggle and the fear and anguish that defined her, but her response to what life threw at her in an instant. Mary praised God with a song that continues to inspire even us Lutherans, not to mention continuing her own Gospel proclamation long after that, because the story of hope in her Son does not stop with his birth, but fully emerges with a Resurrection to empower Mary, “Holly,” and all of us children of God. Yes, “Holly” still lives out her own version of praising God, helping the “weak and lowly ones” that Mary adored God for doing in Jesus Christ. And so it goes with all of us children of God, who will endure our fair portion of despair, to say the least, but God will not allow it to define our lives. And it may just take the living Mary’s among us to remind us that there is still more than enough love and hope and compassion in our Risen Lord to continue bringing that Greatest News to life. And so, for Mary and all the faithful women, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: from Lutheran Church of the Savior (Haddonfield, NJ);
<https://oursaviorhaddonfield.org/>*