



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 23, 2018
MICAH 5:2-5a; CANTICLE 15; HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-45

MOTHER OF GOD

Luke 1:39-45 *[In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.]*

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."]

Let's try a little thought experiment. I invite you to close your eyes or look down and unfocus your gaze. Whatever helps you see more clearly in your mind's eye. Now form a picture in your mind of Mary, the one we just heard about in the gospel.

After learning she is pregnant with a miraculous child, she rushes to visit her cousin who immediately recognizes that Mary is transformed, saying, "Blessed are you among women and the mother of my

Lord." Mary responds in song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Form a picture in your mind of this woman. Notice what she is wearing, what she is doing, the expression on her face, her posture. And notice what you are feeling toward her. Is it curiosity, affinity, affection, something else? Stay with this picture. You have just joined the countless millions of people who over the

last 2000 years have tried to understand the essence and meaning of Mary, first among women and mother of God.

OK, you can open your eyes now. I wonder what you imagined. Maybe it was a dark-skinned, young woman dressed in the simple linen shift of her humble origins. Maybe it was a beautiful woman whose face glows with a holy light as she gazes to the heavens. Maybe it was a timeless icon whose outstretched arms welcome and embrace the world's sorrows. It could have been any of these images and many, many more. Because despite the fact that there are only a few brief references in scripture to Mary, mother of Jesus, we have inherited a rich tradition of interpretation and veneration of this woman.

Jesus' followers knew her as Miriam of Nazareth, mother of Jesus and adoptive mother of his beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. Over the next two hundred years, early Christian writers contrasted her obedience to God's will with the disobedience of the first woman, casting Mary as the "second Eve," the one who gave new life to mankind. In the fourth and fifth century, as church doctrine developed around Christ as the son of God, Mary was understood as paradox:

Mother and Virgin; Human and Vessel of the Divine. In the early 6th century, the Council of Ephesus declared Mary to be *Theotokos*, the "God Bearer."ⁱ

Mary's defining characteristics and inspiration continued to evolve over the centuries. During the reformation, she was seen as the "guarantee of the reality of the incarnation and the human nature of Christ."ⁱⁱ And as a primary model of faith. Her apparition in Mexico in the 1500's to a native Mexican not only dignified the indigenous culture but blessed their struggle against white colonizers. Native Mexicans claimed her words as their own, "The Mighty One has done great things for me. . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

To this day, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a national symbol of Mexico and the patron of liberation theology, the one who affirms God's preferential option for the poor.

As you can probably tell, I love cultural history, but sometimes it can distract us from the fact that Mary was real. She was human. A devout Jewish woman who made a life for herself, her husband, and

family in the rural environs of Nazareth. There is very little information about her in scripture, but even with the little we have several things stand out.

First, Mary listens. She listens closely to the angel Gabriel when he tells her God is with her and that she will bear a child. She listens to her cousin Elizabeth when she acknowledges the importance of what is happening to her. She listens to the shepherds who come to meet Jesus and share what they have learned about the birth of the Messiah. She listens to Simeon and Anna in the temple who tell her what her son's life will mean for Israel and the world. And she listens to Jesus himself when he tells her that he is meant to be in God's house.

She doesn't listen passively, but with a willingness to consider what God might be up to in her life and her family's life. That is what obedience is. Not blind compliance but listening with a willingness to change.

Second, Mary travels. She travels from Nazareth to the hill country to share her startling news with her cousin Elizabeth. She travels to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth, signifying his lineage from King David. She travels to Egypt to escape Herod's plans to kill infant boys. She travels to

Jerusalem to present Jesus at the temple and for Passover. She travels back to Nazareth to raise her family. She travels to Cana and Capernaum and many other towns as part of Jesus' ministry.

She listens and what she hears makes her willing to travel, to pack up and leave familiar surroundings. She travels to Jewish towns and gentile towns, ones that welcome her and others that are hostile. She goes where she needs to go.

And third, Mary shows up. When the angel announces her life is changed forever, she replies, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." She shows up for her cousin when Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy changes her life. She shows up at the temple to take part in religious traditions and to collect her son when he strays. She shows up in Cana and encourages her son's first miracle. And of course, she shows up at the foot of the cross, taking her place with the other women who bear witness to Jesus' suffering and death.

Mary listens, and goes, and shows up. The convergence of her life and our perennial longing for the holy have created an invitation across the centuries. An invitation to all people – women and men – to listen to God, to go where we are

called, and to show up in places of need. Meister Eckart, the 13th C German mystic said, “We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born.”

So Mary’s story is our story, too. The Magnificat, which we prayed in place of a psalm today, is the story of our common calling. Listen to this retelling, knowing it is your song, too:

Your soul reflects and enlarges the presence of God. You rejoice that God is working through the details of your life, bringing you to wholeness. God sees you in all your humility and imperfections and is pleased. Surely, it is right to call you blessed. Amen.

ⁱ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 157.



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