

“Why Mary Matters”

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:26-55

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If you grew up in a Protestant church, and we might say especially a Reformed or Presbyterian Church, it is possible you may never have heard a sermon in worship on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Oh, to be sure, she may have made cameo appearances in and about Christmas and Easter as she kneels before the manger in Bethlehem or before the cross on Calvary, but for the most part Mary has been ignored or placed in the distant background of the church’s theology and proclamation. No doubt much of this has been a reaction to a perceived over emphasis upon, and even distortion of, Mary’s role in history or in the Bible by the Roman Catholic Church. But the fact remains that we protestants may never have given Mary her due.

The role and nature of Mary has long been a divisive issue in Christendom, and long before there was a Protestant Reformation too, I might add. The second, third, and fifth centuries debated whether she should be given the title of “Theotokos,” meaning bearer or “mother of God.” Despite the fact that Martin Luther and John Calvin maintained high views of Mary and her place in salvation history, their spiritual decedents tended to ignore Mary as they placed the emphasis wholly upon her child. Have you ever seen St. Mary’s Presbyterian Church? No, you haven’t because there isn’t one in America. I have a friend who is the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in St. Mary’s, Georgia — but that doesn’t count.

However, in case you haven’t been paying attention for the past two decades, Mary has been emerging from the shadows and her role and work are being examined anew by Protestants and Catholics alike. These two branches of Christendom are trying to focus more on what they hold in common rather than what separates them.

Here are some religious magazines, typically Protestant, that I have saved over a number of years that have carried featured articles on the role and work of Mary:

The Christian Century, “Saint Mary for Protestants” (December 14, 2004)

Hungryhearts, “Mary, A Model for All Christians” (Winter 2003)

Presbyterians Today, “Mary, the First Disciple” (December 2006)

And two from *Christianity Today*,

“The Blessed Evangelical Mary” (December 2003)

“Incendiary Mary” (December 2006)

But it is not just the church, Protestant and Catholic, or just the religious press which have a revived interest in Mary. Our secular society has taken notice as well, spurred in part because of the ever-expanding role of women in western culture. A few years ago *TIME* magazine featured article (March 21, 2005) was entitled “Hail Mary”, and it discussed how Protestants are finding their own reasons to celebrate the mother of Jesus. The current Editor-in-Chief of *Time* magazine at the time, John Huey, was a member of my congregation. In addition, *Newsweek* also had a feature article way back in 1997 entitled: “The Meaning of Mary.”

Now, back to the Bible. In our Gospel lesson today, I read Luke’s account of the Annunciation of the Messiah’s birth by the angel Gabriel. And I went on to read the lectionary selection of Mary’s subsequent visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, which contains Mary magnificent song of praise called, *The Magnificat*. It is Elizabeth during Mary’s visit who is inspired to call her blessed. “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Some Protestants act surprised that that is actually in the Bible. So then, it must be okay to call Mary blessed. And surely it is okay to call her holy, which only means “set apart” for God. Personally, I take no offense in referring to Mary as the “mother of God,” if one understands that she is not the origin of divinity but rather the bearer of the divine’s Son.

But the truth of the matter is that we Protestants have never been too sure of what to call Mary or how to treat her. She has mostly been the object of benign neglect. Even today she remains an enigma, an unexamined and mysterious figure who is so prominent in the Gospels. Regrettably for Protestants and Catholics there has been something rather unreal and unnatural about her. She emerges in pale blue, or as an alabaster stature with an unnatural look of chaste perfection. But who was she really and what has she to do with your life and mine? Why does Mary matter?

Today I want us to focus on what the New Testament actually reveals about Mary. Unfortunately, much of our information and misinformation about Mary has little to do with the scriptures, and this has been true of Protestants and Catholics alike. We have relied so much on rumor, assumptions, obscure traditions and denominational biases that the real Mary remains concealed behind a veil of prejudice and dogma.

Protestants have wrongly accused of Catholics of worshiping Mary, almost as if she were part of the Godhead. There well may be some Catholics who are guilty of this but it is not part of Catholic theology. Protestants also are concerned over asking Mary to pray for sinners now and at the hour of their death. But asking Mary to pray for sinners is not the same as praying to Mary as Catholics have been accused of doing. At any rate, Protestants and Catholics alike are taking a new look at Mary with a view of liberating her from the confines of church tradition and polemical stereotypes and recovering the prominent role given her in scripture.

The renewed interest in Mary may have begun with the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 under the leadership of Pope John XXIII. He pushed for a more biblical perspective on Mary and rightly so. Following this, twelve scholars representing Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Reformed traditions collaborated on a three-year study in which they achieved a striking consensus about the scriptural image of Mary. They published a book by *Fortress Press* (1978) entitled Mary in the New Testament. In reading this volume many Catholics have been surprised to learn the source of some of their traditional beliefs about Mary and to discover that the warrant for many of them is not in scripture but in ancient church traditions. Beliefs about her immaculate conception, that is to say that she was conceived without sin, or her perpetual virginity, or the assumption of her body and soul into heaven at death have no basis in scripture.

But if some Catholic beliefs concerning Mary have their basis outside of scripture, you could say the same with respect to our Protestant inclination to avoid or dismiss Mary. You simply cannot read the New Testament with any understanding and escape the prominent role given to Mary in the Bible. The biblical picture of Mary and the consensus of Protestant and Catholic scholars alike is that Mary immerses from the pages of the New Testament as the model Christian disciple who rejoices and marvels at her son, who may question him on occasions but who sticks beside him through thick and thin with an unwavering devotion.

Mary can and should serve as a role model for disciples today, for at least three reasons. To begin with, the thing we must first acknowledge and emulate in Mary is her remarkable availability to God. Sometimes we wrongly assume that when God calls us into his service he is more interested in our ability or our inability. But the truth is that God is more concerned with our availability. God will equip us if we are only willing to serve. As we consider Mary's role in divine drama, we have to ask whether we have placed ourselves at God's disposal. Have we been available to God for discipleship and service.

You see, there is nothing in the biblical story to confirm that Mary was the only one suited to her particular role. Granted, she was virgin, a faithful and God-fearing young girl and a descendent of David — but there may well have been hundreds or thousands just like her in Judea. Since Protestants do not accept the idea of her immaculate conception or her sinlessness, we are not locked into the position that she was the only one who could have fulfilled her divinely appointed role. Others may have been as virtuous, as faithful, and as deserving, but surely no one could have been more available to God than was young Mary, the mother of Jesus.

When Gabriel announced God's will for Mary's life, as unbelievable and as frightening a prospect as this must have been, she responded by saying. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord;

let it be with me according to your word.” Thus, did Mary place herself completely at God’s disposal and surrender herself to God’s will. Those words of Mary are not only words of surrender and submission, but they are words of wisdom as well, as a popular Beatles song from an earlier day once reminded us:

When I find myself in times of trouble,
Mother Mary comes to me,
Speaking words of wisdom — let it be.

The words “let it be” are Mary’s way of saying yes to the call of God. She could have never known at the time how her decision would impact her own future or the life of her child. But she made herself available to God nevertheless.

So, ask yourself today, how available am I to the call of God, to be involved in the work and the mission of his kingdom. When the church asks for volunteers to do its work, when the church requests financial support to fund its mission, are we available or strangely absent? Have we responded to God’s call for service or have we been so preoccupied with ourselves and with other matters that for all intents and purposes we are really not available to the Lord?

If one is to be an effective disciple today, he or she must not only be available to God, but also be accessible to people. You may have the strongest, most genuine, the most personally rewarding faith in the world, but unless you relate it to the real needs of people about you, then it is in no sense an active faith. Unless your faith moves you to be involved in the needs and the welfare of others then it is of little value. We all remember the parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus told, what practical value was the faith of either the Priest or the Levite who passed by on the other side of the man in need? Their faith may have been something they wore as a badge or kept on the shelf for display or brought out on the Sabbath. Perhaps they could theologize about God or praise God, or defend God to the infidels, but it seems they were incapable of serving him by serving others. If your faith doesn’t move you from your prayer room to the public square then it is highly likely you are not accessible to others.

So Mary was certainly one who was comfortable with and accessible to people — to her son, to other disciples, and to others as well. Mary did not retire after she gave birth to Jesus, but was never far from Jesus, even in the end. In the Gospels we find Mary going with her family to sacred festivals, attending a wedding party, following her son about the countryside, worrying about his safety and health, trying to get a word in edgewise with him, and even in those final awful hours where she knelt beneath him at the cross on Calvary. Mary was always there if her son needed her, and sometimes even if he didn’t, as mothers are prone to do.

Mary was always accessible to Jesus and to others. We may legitimately question whether Mary fully understood this special son of hers, whether she was in full support of his ministry, but no one could ever question Mary's love for her son or her accessibility to him. Say all you wish about the courage of men in the face of danger. But just note that when Jesus reached the end of his life and was dying as an enemy of the state, it was primarily women who had the courage and the love to stay with him and one of those was Mary, his mother.

So ask yourself this morning in so far as your own discipleship is concerned, "Am I really as accessible to people as I ought to be? Am I sensitive to their needs, sympathetic and compassionate? Am I willing to listen to others and support them? Am I the kind of person that others can rely on and can turn to for help?"

Finally, if Mary is to be our model for Christian discipleship, then it is not only crucial that we be available to God and that we be accessible to people, but as it is equally essential that along with Mary we are willing to become vulnerable. It is, perhaps, the most demanding aspect of a vibrant faith and a consistent discipleship, that we be willing to risk who we are and what we have that the Lord might use us in service. Quite often in the service of God and neighbor it is necessary to expose ourselves to ridicule, to misunderstanding, to pain or to loss. This is the risky, the scary aspect of faith and prevents so many people from moving from admirers of Jesus to followers of Jesus. They want to serve the Lord ... but only in an advisory capacity. If your following of Jesus Christ does not cost you something then surely it is not worth very much.

And yet, if we can learn anything from Mary it is that when we accept the Lord's will for our lives and when we submit to his bidding it does not necessarily lead us down smooth and easy paths. Being the mother of Jesus was not a comfortable task and the cross made it extremely difficult and heart rending. Mary's faith did not always enable her to understand what God was doing or why. No doubt she lived in fear of her son's life and agonized over his death. Her willingness even to bear this child could have cost her her marriage, her reputation, even her life depending on how Joseph responded to her pregnancy. So saying yes to God and being available to people came at a great personal expense to Mary. But still, if this were the price she must pay for being available to God and others, then she would be vulnerable despite the risk it required.

Is this not also a part of discipleship and faithfulness in every generation? Who of us has not been called upon to love in the midst of hatred, to give when others hold back, to speak the truth when lies would be so much more convenient, to practice honesty in a day of accepted corruption, to take a stand which may alienate us from family, our peers, or to suffer for righteousness sake? When we put our faith in to action and when we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord it may be a difficult and crucifying experience. And yet, we dare to

believe that in doing the will of the Lord not only are we blessed but we will become a blessing to others.

There is indeed much that we Protestants can and should learn from the example of Mary. We have ignored her for too long. In his classic book on the life of Martin Luther, Roland Bainton wrote in Here I Stand that Martin Luther saw three miracles in Christ's nativity: That God became human; that a virgin conceived; and that Mary believed. In Luther's mind the greatest of all these miracles was the last. Mary did believe and to such an extent that she was willing to be available to God, to be accessible to people and to be vulnerable in the carrying out of God's will.

Without question Mary should be a model for anyone who would become a follower of Jesus. But the larger question is, IS SHE?

So let us learn from Mother Mary and let us follow her example because there is a place and a work for each of us in the providence of God.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the legacy of Mary, the mother of our Lord. Enable us by your grace to learn from her example and to be faithful and effective disciples in our own day, for we pray in the name of her son and our Savior, Christ Jesus the Lord.
Amen.