

## Mary, Mother of God

Rev. William Stell

December 24, 2017

*Luke 1:46-55 — “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. The Lord’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. God has shown strength with his arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

Mary, the mother of Jesus, doesn’t get all that much attention in Presbyterian churches. As Protestants, we tend to think, “That’s not really our thing. The Catholics are the ones who care about Mary.” But I am convinced that all people of faith have much to learn from this woman, who brought us God in the flesh.

Our first reading this morning is traditionally called “the Annunciation”: an angel named Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah, the Jewish people’s long-awaited savior, who will rescue them from their oppressors. Because many of us are familiar with this story, it’s easy to forget just how shocking it is, just how shocked Mary herself, a teenager, would have been. First, of course, there’s this angel, this messenger of God, who just shows up at her place. We aren’t told what the angel looked like (perhaps he looked more or less like any other person), but we are told that Mary was confused and unsettled by the angel’s presence and initial words: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” I imagine Mary being like *Um, I’m sorry, who are you? And...what?* And it only gets weirder after that. Surprise #2 is that Mary is pregnant—even though, she insists, she’s never had sex. Surprise #3 is that the baby she will give birth to is going to be the Messiah. That’s why the angel tells Mary to name the baby “Jesus”—*Yeshua* in Hebrew, meaning, “God saves.”

And there’s a fourth surprise, a much bigger one, woven into this: see, most Jews of Mary’s day didn’t think that the Messiah would be divine. When they imagined the Messiah, they imagined a human, who God would raise up to liberate them from the Roman Empire and who God would appoint to be their ruler, just as the great King David had ruled the Israelites hundreds of years earlier. But in our first reading, the angel tells Mary that the Messiah, this liberator and king, will be different from David, and different from every other human ruler, because Jesus, her child, will reign *forever*. He is holy—which means set apart, different from all others—because the eternal God is uniquely present in him. So, on top of the whole pregnancy thing, Mary is now being told that her child will be somehow divine. And then, just for kicks, the angel tacks on one

last surprise: “You know your relative Elizabeth—the really old one who everybody thinks is barren? Yeah, she’s about to have a baby, too.” I don’t care what you’ve gone through in life: you’ve never had a day quite like Mary here.

Are these good surprises for her? It’s easy to assume so, because we all know that the story has a happy ending. We also know that, at the end of the angel’s announcement, in our first reading, Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Throughout Christian history, that response has been held up as an exemplar of submission to God’s will—especially for women. Many Christians, I think, hear those words of Mary’s and imagine a simple voice, a willing voice, a joyful voice. But I can’t help but wonder: what if Mary wasn’t feeling joyful? What if her internal response was more complicated than what we read here in Scripture? Perhaps she wanted to protest, wanted to say, “I didn’t ask for this,” but she didn’t feel like that was an option for her. While many of us today accept a woman’s right to decide when she will have children, Mary’s historical context did not afford her that right. Her world did not encourage her to think of her body as her own. So, perhaps the reason she responded to the angel with, essentially, “Yes sir, I’ll do whatever you say” was because she didn’t feel free to say anything else.

Or perhaps Mary *wanted* to feel happy, knew that this *should* be a good surprise for her, that it *was* a blessed surprise for her people, but deep down, it still left this teenage girl feeling terrified. And perhaps, in that moment, she was unable to reckon with just how terrifying the news was, so she tried to cope with it by immediately responding to the angel, “It’s alright. It’s okay.” We know how that goes, right? How, in moments of crisis, we can will ourselves to believe, to insist that things will turn out alright—not because things necessarily will, but because we aren’t ready to handle the possibility that things *won’t* be alright.

At the end of the day, we don’t know how Mary felt in that moment, but we do know how she felt later on. We know because of our second reading, traditionally called “the Magnificat.” It’s a beautiful, powerful poem about God’s faithfulness and justice. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary speaks those words shortly after the Annunciation, when she is reunited with her relative Elizabeth, sees that she too is pregnant, and then hears Elizabeth affirm the angel’s prophecy that Mary will give birth to the Messiah.

In closing, I’ll read the Magnificat once more, but before I do that, I want to tell you something that one of my college professors told his New Testament class. You know, the words of the Magnificat weren’t written down right then and there, when Mary visited Elizabeth. Like all the other stories and sayings of Jesus in the Bible, they were recorded after the fact and then passed down over time. So, when Luke wrote this gospel here, he had to do his homework, if you will: he went around collecting stories, pulling from various sources, talking with eyewitnesses. It’s quite possible, my professor said, that Luke met and talked with Mary herself, many years later, and asked her, “What was it like? What should I write down in this book?” And years after giving birth to her son, then watching him grow up, die, and live again; after being guided by

God over mountaintops of joy and through valleys of pain; after a lifetime of pondering all of these things in her heart, Mary said to Luke, “Here’s what I want you to share....”

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. The Lord’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. God has shown strength with his arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Friends, when crisis strikes, when we hear news that terrifies us, we find all sorts of ways to cope. Sometimes, we’ll start screaming, “I didn’t ask for this!” Other times, we’ll just cower inside and say, “It’s alright. It’s okay.” However we respond in that moment, know that we can grow into Mary’s final response. Know that, in time, we will weather the storm, and my prayer for all of us is that, on the other side of it, we will rest assured of God’s faithfulness and celebrate God’s justice, as Mary did. May the spirit of assurance, gratitude, and justice that marks the Magnificat make its mark on our lives and hearts as well. Amen.