

Aug. 15, 2021

Mary, Mother of our Lord - Epiphany, Richmond

Isaiah 61:7-11; Ps. 34:1-9; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 1:46-55

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I was curious, so I went back to see the last time we got to celebrate the day of Mary, Mother of Our Lord on a Sunday - when did August 15th last fall on a Sunday? - and it was 2010, so a good long while ago. I wish we could observe the day of Mary every year, even though we kind of do every year in Advent, but pulling this out of the unique context of December gives us a chance to explore it a little differently, because Mary is one of my very favorite people among the saints of the church.

She is commonly known in the church's long tradition as the first Christian, because she was the first to know that the Messiah, Jesus, was about to come into the world and bring salvation to all, which a lot of people would eventually know, but she was one of the few to also be aware that his saving work would include his execution, which she would have to witness - the angel Gabriel tells her right there in the same story where she found out she would be Jesus' mother: a sword will pierce your heart - and she also knew very soon that Jesus' way might be hard to follow. And for that reason among others, Mary has been lifted up as the model of faith for all believers, always representing the whole church and the church embracing the full story of Jesus' teaching, outreach, suffering, death, and resurrection, all for our redemption. Even Martin Luther, famous for defying so much medieval dogma and criticizing things like praying to the saints, loved the practice of devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.

When we ask ourselves what that means - following Mary's example as we practice and live our own faith - one thing for me jumps to the top, because surely the most defining feature of her life is that she bore Christ to the world, which is what we're all supposed to do.

We practice being like Mary every Sunday: we share Christ with one another in the speaking and hearing of God's word, in the giving and receiving of forgiveness of sins, in the exchange of peace, and at each of our Sunday liturgies, we share the body and blood of Christ - we, following Mary, give Jesus to one another. And that, then - the thing we do on Sunday - is what we're supposed to in our lives the whole rest of the week. This act of worship is also a rehearsal for going out continuing to share the joyous, good news of Christ with the sad, vulnerable, mistreated and misguided world that surrounds us.

Now we could stop right there if we wanted to and just say, go thou and do likewise, but it wouldn't be right to pass up the opportunity that this day of Mary offers us to ask, again in good Lutheran fashion, what does this mean?

And for that, I think we turn to the gospel passage from Luke, which I'm sure we recognize as the last part of the story I mentioned before, where the angel Gabriel visits this young, unsuspecting girl in the village of Nazareth and announces to her that she will be giving birth to the Son of God by the Holy Spirit.

What I want us to notice, as we reflect on bearing Christ to the world, is that Mary's alarm at this news soon turns to resolve as she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to

your word." Then, it says, the angel departed from her, and Mary set out to stay with her cousin Elizabeth.

And what we get next is this extraordinary song of praise in today's gospel reading - a mash-up of songs from Miriam and Hannah and Psalms and Isaiah, along with Mary's own take - which we call the Magnificat, and it teaches us a lot about what happens when we, God's people, bear Christ to the world.

Now, because Mary was very likely in her middle-teens when this conversation with the angel Gabriel happened, it has become fashionable in recent years to emphasize Mary's vulnerability and how scared she must have been in that society where so-called illegitimate motherhood was a dangerous position to be in, as it often has continued to be. There is that dimension to her - she could have felt very alone and uncertain - I don't want to deny that to people, especially the very overwhelmed teens in our church, who may find a sympathetic and kindred spirit in the story of their fellow teen sister, Mary.

But make no mistake - there is also world-class courage on display here in this hymn. Her mind immediately goes not to how precarious her situation is, but to the mighty things that God has done and will do for those who have been on the downside of life.

And notice the pattern - she very quickly acknowledges her own experience and God's great saving work - God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant, has done great things for me - and then moves right into what this is all going to mean for the larger world.

So Mary sings that those who in their pride have imagined a world or a country or a culture in which they dominate everything are destined to be scattered. Those who believe that their position of authority is a throne need to get ready to vacate while those at the bottom of the ladder are lifted higher. Those who have no care for the hungry or the otherwise needy, the disenfranchised, those who have been sidelined or trampled, they will finally have the portion that they should have had all along. She doesn't speculate or even ask who's at fault in that imbalance; she just says God is determined for the hungry to be filled. And, she sings, that those who have routinely been on the receiving end of suspicion, of ridicule, of lousy circumstances, can look forward to being shown mercy once again. Here's the kicker to all of that: as God's baptized servants - as those who have signed on or stayed signed on to what has been clearly laid out as God's intentions for the world - we're part of that plan. Bringing those changes about is going to be our vocation; we're going to find ourselves swept up into the things that God is already doing. That's why this is a song of courage, because that is not easy. We surrender a good bit of comfort, we make enemies, we meet with opposition, we meet with ingratitude, we meet with failure, along with - of course - blessings we did not expect - couldn't even imagine - and relationships more precious than gold.

Because, after all, what kind of God do we confess and serve, but a God who has gotten involved with human stories - and still does - and especially those where people have been downtrodden. "Abraham! Pick up and go to a place where the system of haves and have-nots is so entrenched you won't even know where to start." "People of Israel! I've been watching you in slavery for a long time. Help is on the way." "Exiles in Babylon! I am still on your side and soon you'll be back in your homeland." These are all things God says along the way, and that's the biblical legacy on which Mary draws.

And because of this, we can say with both confidence and fear: Mary is singing an invitation and a heads up to those who love their own power. Mary is singing to people who value self-preservation over caring for the neighbor, Mary is singing to those who have hoarded resources, Mary is singing to those who value short-term wins over God's call to long-term justice. And a lot of days, that's me. So I can so easily say how much I admire and emulate Mary as Christian example, but she's singing to me the warning that this business of bearing Christ to the world is not without its costs. A sword will pierce your heart as well, DAVE.

But thanks be to God, she's also singing to those who have suffered because of all those human behaviors, and on days when *that's* me, I give the heartiest of thanks, and it is really out of that dependence, that trust, that knowledge of what God is up to - not out of my own riches or accomplishments or skills - that I'm able to join her in bearing Christ to you, to my friends, to my enemies, to the world.

In the name of Christ, amen.