

The Gift of Mary

Menno Mennonite Church
December 22, 2024

Purpose: To appreciate the human experience reflected in Mary's and Elizabeth inaugurates God with us in even the most intimate parts of human experience.

Message: In Mary's experience, God with us begins to show its radical dimensions.

Scripture: Luke 1:26-49 (I will read); Please read Psalm 113

Synopsis: Ours is not a tradition that has carved a great reservation for the person of Mary. There is something special there to be sure, but the broad protestant tradition has allowed that special regard to be paid to the saints writ large, and Mary even more so. Yet there is little denying the fact that she occupies a real estate within the story that is important beyond being one more character. Her example of faithful interaction with God begins something important. It models God with us already in the messiness of life. Her choice was a brave one: to be faithful above all else. As such, she joins the ranks of those who model for us what God with us can mean in realistic ways.

Luke 1: 26-49 (CEB)

³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel,
“How will this happen
since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man?”

³⁵ The angel replied,
“The Holy Spirit will come over you
and the power of the Most High
will overshadow you.

Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy.
He will be called God’s Son.

³⁶ Look, even in her old age,
your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son.
This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’
is now six months pregnant.

³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God.”

³⁸ Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant.
Let it be with me just as you have said.”
Then the angel left her.

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands.

⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting,
the child leaped in her womb,
and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out,
“God has blessed you above all women,
and he has blessed the child you carry.

⁴³ Why do I have this honor,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting,
the baby in my womb jumped for joy.

⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed
that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

⁴⁶ Mary said,
“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am
I rejoice in God my savior.
⁴⁸ YHWH has looked with favor
on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone
will consider me highly favored
⁴⁹ because the mighty one
has done great things for me.
Holy is God’s name.

There is something about Mary. She is one of the central pivot characters of the Christmas story—more than that; the Salvation Story. For many she plays a role in faith equivalent to her son, if not more so. For many within the high church traditions Jesus is the means of salvation—the one that does the work of dying and being raised from the dead, but it is Mary and the saints are the ones alongside with whom we can talk and pray to. They can be approached because they are the more approachable human characters that walks alongside us. She is the one that listens because she is the one that understands the more mundane elements of being human, weaknesses and all. Mary, mother of God, is to be venerated and respected above all and in all because it was she who brings Jesus into the world, and it is she who connects us, the people in the world, to God the one outside the world because who doesn't listen to their mother. It is a huge over simplification: absolutely. I am not doing Marian theology any justice in a brief paragraph at all.

Because by in large, this is what gets left behind. In the protestant rush to clean out and spruce up the way church gets done, and to connect to the way the Bible gets read by the people in the pews, along with all the other wonderful things we will be celebrating in the coming year of anniversary memory, we have left that connection to the other elements of the salvation story out because they were too hard to normalize to the “Sola Scriptura” [Only Scripture], and, by extension “Sola Christus” [only Jesus] concepts of our theological forebearers. There is a reason why the only decorations we have in this building are not images of any kind, but the inscriptions commending us to the work and centrality of scripture: that is the center of our practice and praise and we were loath to forget it. We got here for a reason: there is a natural mistrust of the sensationalism that can be associated with the saints and the way that the veneration of the holy host had taken the place of the working and living life of following Jesus. All of this is true and then some: but I can't help but feel that we are not just a little bit the poorer for it.

Let me explain. As readily as I will admit to my confusion when I come across the selection of devotional candles in the grocery aisle, there is something appropriately human to this story that announces that Christmas is upon us. There is something our scale about it. Matthew we are given royal genealogy and a befuddled Joseph wondering what is to be done. John jumps right into the theological heart of the matter declaring the nature and divinity of our Lord. Mark dispenses with the birth all together and gets into the ministry of Jesus on page one. But Luke tells a different story all together. It is big; it is strange and marvelous. But it is human.

Luke is in no hurry. He sort of meanders into the story. He begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, an obscure priest and his wife. An angel tries to involve Zechariah in what God is doing, but Zechariah's doubts and questions get him in trouble with the angel who shuts his mouth. The focus then falls on Elizabeth, his wife, a newly pregnant old woman. For years she has lived what in that culture was the disgraced and empty life of a barren woman. Now joyfully and miraculously pregnant, she shuts herself away from her peering neighbors to contemplate God's goodness to her.

Then Luke suddenly shifts to another woman far away in Galilee. We know even less about her. Luke tells us nothing of her parents, her siblings, only that Joseph her fiancée is of the house of David. She's a virgin, she's engaged to be married to Joseph, and she gets an unexpected visit by an angel. But this visit turns out quite differently than the visit to Zechariah. While Zechariah dithers in doubt, Mary accepts the angel's word in faith. "Be it done to me according to your word."

Full of this great, frightening, awesome news; tipped off by the angel to her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary goes off on a long trip to visit her cousin.

This strange visit raises questions, doesn't it? Where was Mary's mother, her sisters? Why did she have to go all the way down to Judea to share with an old cousin? Was it the shame of pregnancy out of wedlock; the knowing stares of a tight-knit community? As he so often does, Luke leaves the details to our imagination.

But what Luke does give us is these women. Two powerless nobodies from no where who have been transported to the front and center of God's plan of salvation. Not only do they need to wrap their heads around being pregnant (no easy trick even in ordinary circumstances they are charged with the working and annunciation of what God was about to do. All the men are absent and silent. Herod is off in the palace; Zechariah is writing notes, Joseph is wondering if he wants any part of this at all. It is these women; these cousins of different ages and times who share the gift of life and the conviction of "yes, God is in even this" something which could not have been as easy or natural as our repeated reading of the story and leveling of the meaning makes it out to be. One author comments on this scene with gentle insight: "One is old and has no children; the other is young and has no husband. But both are pregnant. God has been at work." Here they are together; embracing and talking about the extraordinary blessings that have come to them. If this is not a trespass into the deeply personal and holy, I don't know what is.

In this we are given Mary as the one who actually finds a way to believe that which was presented her. I wonder: do we stick with Mary meek and mild because it is our way of making sense of what this is; turning the revolutionary invitation to a casual business proposal? I think we would like that. Sometimes what makes Saints, Saints is the notion that they are just that—breathers of rarefied air, never to be touched by the likes of us. They never speak out turn. They are completely unflappable, and they come with a fully formed notion of what YHWH God has for them on the other side of what is being asked. I think we like that because it eliminates the possibility that God would ever do something even 1/100th so bold in our lives. We like our world, our plans, our ways, thank you very much, and we don't need God to come in and muck things up for us. This is far less about God getting out of the business, and far more about us convincing ourselves that God cannot change the world anymore, especially if God can't ask something of us because we aren't the right people because we don't fit the mold we have made for the ones who get involved in the God stuff and it does not look like us. I wonder if we are glad to either ignore or venerate Mary because it relieves us from contemplating what God might be doing in our very lives.

What makes Mary Mary, worthy of admiration and connection is not the absence of these fears and thoughts; it is her ability to feel them and to still find a way to say yes even so. Mary says yes to God and that makes all the difference. She signs up for all this amazing, wonderful, scary possibility that was laid out before her. She chooses to believe at the end of it all that indeed there is nothing that is impossible for God, even such an amazing work in someone as normal and ordinary as her; the wrong person, in the wrong relationship, in the wrong place, with the wrong political situation. She says yes. She finds a way to listen, to hear the extraordinary, and to be invited into it and still find a way to embrace all that was laid before not because it was her fate or the singularity she was created to embrace, but because it was who and what she chose to be.

What we miss when we exclude the admiration of Mary is the opportunity to embrace the story of Mary as somewhat, somehow, someway our own. We miss the opportunity to have Mary as a companion for our journey and for our calling. It is the nature of being Christian: we are called to follow, listening to the master and finding our way into what God is doing with us. For many of us it will be fairly subtly Not that I am anticipating archangels on my kitchen table announcing the birth of the Messiah anytime soon, but if we discard Mary either by our

principled exclusion of thinking her special or by the elevation of her condition as utterly out of the ordinary and usual, we miss the opportunity to ask what is among the most important questions we even ask, and that we must ask all the time: what might God be doing right here, right now and where might I be invited into it? We miss the opportunity to have someone to whom we can look to and identify with, thinking of her as perhaps the first Christian: the one in whom the following of the way and will of God begins, a tradition that we are invited into each and every day as we in our turn follow this way and celebrate the following of the one who leads the way.

God has never stopped asking to come into the world; God never will stop. Immanuel draws close each day. We are given this invitation to incarnation in the midst of lives we lead, the ways we miss the call, the ways we might want to say no. We are called like Mary to the awesome, frightening, joyful, hopeful task of declaring that God's Immanuel has come and is coming, recognizing that whatever we do, where ever we go, whatever the system, the power, the impossibility, God is at work, and God will turn things around and we have the privilege to play our part in that work.

Mary's way is our way and in that we celebrate as God comes to us, even yet, turning the world into what it will be. Amen.