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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH
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Text: Luke 1:39-55

Who Is This Most Highly Favored Lady?

Several years ago, I was working as a professional harpist, playing and teaching music throughout my community.
During the summers, I'd spend nearly every weekend performing at weddings.
And months before each wedding I'd sit down the couple to pick out music,
Talking them through the various opportunities to insert a song into their ceremonies.
As I sat with one Catholic couple they asked that I play some music while they gave flowers to Mary.
"Oh, who's Mary?" I asked, assuming she must be one of their mothers or grandmothers.
"Mary." They repeated, staring at me like I was missing something.
I stared back.
"Mary, the mother of God," the groom finally volunteered after I continued to not understand.
"Oh!! *That* Mary!!" I said.

Growing up Episcopalian means that I'd never really been exposed to Marian devotions.
I'd never prayed a rosary,
Whispered a 'hail Mary,'
Decorated my home with a statue of the mother of God,
And I'd *definitely* never given flowers to her, especially at my wedding.
Yet for much of our world, and probably many of you, Mary – the most highly-favored lady – holds *major* significance.

This morning, we get to spend a little time with Mary.
We just heard in our Gospel story what happened to Mary after she learned she was pregnant.
In a nutshell, Gabriel left and Mary ran.
She took for the hills and made the 80-mile trek to her cousin's house.¹
There she found Elizabeth, her older cousin, and another unexpectedly pregnant woman, carrying John the Baptist in her womb.

The scene that unfolds next is as beautiful as it is absurd:
miraculously pregnant women,
Leaping babies in wombs,
And bursts of spontaneous song in the singing of the "Magnificat:"

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

She sang.

And she was right: From then on, all generations have called her blessed.

Yet as I thought about the Gospel this week, I realized how little I know about Mary.

Intellectually I know the stories,

But spiritually, I’ve hardly given her a thought.

I’m equivalent to that story that the preacher Peter Gomes used to tell “of a Protestant theologian who died and was received by Jesus at the pearly gates. “Ah, Professor,” says Jesus, “I know you have met my father, but I don’t believe you know my mother.”²

I know Jesus, and I know his Father, but his mother...

So I began to dig a little deeper into the piety around this woman,

And I found a deep well of riches.

She’s known by many names:

The Virgin of Virgins,

Holy Mother of God,

The Theotokos – God-bearer,

The Queen of All Saints,

And Queen of Mercy.³

And the artistic portrayals of Mary throughout time are richer still.

Because to look at art of the Madonna is to put up a mirror to society through time:

In the Pre-Renaissance, she’s “represented as queenly: ennobled, enthroned, surrounded by angels and engulfed in celestial light.

In the Renaissance, she’s less empress of heaven, more mother—sewing, nursing and playing with the infant Jesus.

She forms the archetype of Christian womanhood.

Yet she’s no ordinary woman, but that impossible ideal compared with which all other women must ever fall short: the perfect mother and the perfect virgin.”⁴

Beyond images of queen and womanhood perfected, the holy mother of God is seen, as one writer puts it, “as some kind of first-century teenage female Che Guevara.”⁵

She’s shown in wood-cut drawings, stomping on the heads of the rich,

Casting them down as she raises up the lowly.

She’s depicted as a fierce revolutionary leader.

All this, sewn from the words of her song we hear today:

² Time magazine, 3.21.05, p. 64 via Alan Gates’ St. Paul’s Episcopal Church sermon on Mary (11.28.2010), pg. 2

³ <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/12/11/holy-mary-drenched-in-symbolism>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*, p. 67.

“God has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 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.”

This song is so subversive that it’s even been banned at different times through history:
 Like when the British ruled India, they forbade it from being sung in churches.
 Or during the “dirty war” in Argentina (1976-1983) when “the mothers of disappeared children
 postered the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat, the military junta banned all public
 displays of the song.”⁶

How can one woman be so many things?
 A Queen of all queens, the Handmaiden of God, a holy Virgin, the God-Bearer, and a subversive
 revolutionary leader.

She *is* all these things – and so much more.

And yet...

When’s the last time we’ve talked about Mary in a Protestant, that is – non-Catholic, church?
 Perhaps once or twice a year, especially during Advent, and maybe sometime in Holy Week as
 we pause to grieve as she holds her son’s crucified body.

It’s not a mistake we don’t talk about Mary.
 Because she’s a *loaded* topic.

As I prepared for today, I read our former rector Alan Gates’ sermon series on Mary from 8
 years ago, and I was reminded of just what a lightning rod this Queen of all Queens really is.
 Mary has been seen as highly suspect in our Protestant traditions ever since the Reformation.
 In fact, as Alan Gates reminded me, Karl Barth, the great Swiss Reformed theologian of the 20th
 century asserted that “in the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of
 the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest.”⁷

Mary stood in the breaking point between Catholics and Protestants.

Catholics dug into their devotion of her,

And Protestants moved quickly away, seeing anything that remotely connected to Mary with
 suspicion and aversion.

But that was 500 years ago.

500 years!

And yet we are the inheritors of that fissure.

But things don’t always have to be as they’ve been.

⁶ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

⁷ Gates, Alan. *Mother Mary, Part One Introduction and The Second Eve: Hope*. A sermon preached on 11.28.2010 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, pg. 1.

We're the heirs of the Protestant Reformation,
But we don't have to stay in line with all that they laid out for us.
So now, in our own time, we have a choice to make.
Will we embrace this most highly favored lady in our churches and our faith?

The Episcopal Church has already begun tackling these questions,
When (in 1979), as an international body, we decided to reinsert the feast days dedicated to Mary
in the church year.
Of the Annunciation when Mary found out she was pregnant,
And the visitation we heard about in today's reading.

Our church body is beginning to wonder what we've lost by turning away from Mary.
And now the question plants itself among us today.

I'm not suggesting we begin full-throttle Marian devotion,
Placing flowers on a shrine to her,
But I *am* suggesting our Protestant dismissal of her needs some re-evaluation.
Because I suspect that as we grow in deeper relationship with Mary,
We may very well grow into a deeper relationship with her Son.

My hope is that, as we prepare to welcome Jesus into the world tomorrow,
We can spend some time with his mother today.
Not burdened with the weight of our traditions,
But with minds and hearts open to receive and meet again the courageous young teenage girl
who offered up her brave "yes!" to God, and has been blessed ever since.