

Our Sister Mary

a sermon by J. R. Luck
Advent 3b, December 11, 2011
Peace United Church of Christ, Greensboro NC

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

And she conceived by the power of Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

Be it done unto me according to your Word.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Psst. Honey. If I had wanted Catholic I could have gone to Our Lady of Grace down the street. What's next? Kneeling? I am not kneeling.

No. No kneeling. Not yet anyway. But I do want to introduce you today to the Angelus, a devotional prayer that remembers the incarnation and honors Mary. And just to be clear, all of those words are biblical from today's readings in the gospel of Luke. But despite their biblical nature, Protestants don't quite know what to do with Mary.

Personally, I think Mary has become something of a Rorschach blot test: everyone sees her a little differently and as they need to see her. Anti-feminists hold her up as a model of the obedient woman who embraces her "rightful" place in the family. Feminists have championed this strong woman who needed not a man in her life. Greek and Russian Orthodox believers see her as the *theotokos*, the God-bearer. Secularists mock her as a symbol of the irrationality and antiquity of Christian thinking. Catholics exalt her as the Queen of heaven. Hallmark romanticizes her and puts her on cards while the U. S. postal service puts her on Christmas stamps.

And then there are we protestants. What do we protestants do with her? What do we need from her. Apparently not much. I take that back; we do argue a lot about her. We argue about whether she is an intercessor for us in heaven and whether we need one. Some folks argue about whether she was really a virgin; others about whether she had children and therefore whether she had intercourse. We love, nay adore arguing over whether she was immaculately conceived and therefore born without sin.

But when we Protestants are not... protesting, or arguing about her, we're ignoring or minimizing her. With few exceptions, she has been reduced, to a porcelain figurine in our creche. She is fragile, breakable and boxed away for most of the year. When we pull her out, she is there, but we don't actually interact with her. Yes, she helps us feel nostalgic but, in the end, she changes nothing.

Rarely, however, do we actually wrestle with Mary. And why is that? Even after 500 years do we still have something in our protestant DNA that revolts at anything which smells of Catholicism? Perhaps, but I would argue we have other, more unconscious reasons for ignoring her words. Were we to truly interact with the biblical Mary and her words, we would have no choice but to change how we live and how we understand our faith. Better to limit her to a creche than to dare acknowledge what God is asking of us. Better to mock Catholics than to ask whether God might be asking us to give birth to Christ and his Kingdom.

So why don't we start by simply taking a fresh look at this young peasant woman in an occupied country. Actually, by our standards, it would be safer to say she is an older girl. Now let's get rid of the blue head piece and the beatific expression. If I were a movie director filming a movie about Mary, I'd cast for the lead a teenager with piercings, tattoos and dyed hair. And if you don't understand why I would say that about sweet Mary, then you haven't listened to her own words in Luke. So for a moment, let's listen again to that song we call the Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord, for he 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.

...Bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, sending the rich away empty. Folks, it sounds like something out of Occupy Wall Street. American Christians may miss, ignore or deny the political tones of Mary's song, but Herod wouldn't have missed it; not even for a second. After all, Herod had family members executed if he so much smelled a hint of insurrection in the air. Any man, much less any woman, who would so openly sing of his downfall; any woman who would so openly sing of a world turned upside down was nothing short of a subversive radical. Yes, **we** may have reduced Mary to a pleasant mild vehicle for the birth of a child, but she is nothing short of a prophet singing of a new world order. She is the slave singing a field chant as to a coming day when the slave will be exalted and the master turned out. While Gabriel knows who this child is to be, a savior, Mary is the first to see how he will save us. She is the first to understand just how radical Jesus was to be. Gabriel gave voice to his mission; Mary gave voice to Jesus' vision. She is more than the God-bearer; she is the first disciple, the first to see the way, the first to follow the way.

So why do we minimize Mary's role as the first disciples? We minimize Mary because we desire to minimize her sermon. We don't really want to sing of a faith that will turn the world upside down, thank you very much. We like our old world. It makes us... well, maybe not comfy, but it is familiar.

But this world needs some... alteration. John the Baptizer knew it; mountains would have to be made low; low places and those who dwelt there would need to be raised up. Here's the reality of this world folks: if this sermon lasts 15 minutes, then during this sermon 300 children will die in this world from radical poverty. This is a world where the 6 heirs of the Wal-Mart fortune are as wealthy as the bottom 30% of our population.

So what do we do with this world, a world where Herod still reigns smugly; a world where the mighty do as they please; a world where the poor become poorer and the rich richer? How are the hungry to be filled with good things? Well folks, that's where you come in. You have to give birth to the messiah. You have to do more than put a creche in your yard or your living room; you are to bring and to be the good news; you are to put flesh on hope and peace and joy. You are to be Mary in this time.

And no your excuses will not work. No, you are not too young; look at Mary. No, you are not too old; look at Elizabeth. No, it doesn't matter that you're from rural North Carolina. Have you ever been to Nazareth? There's nothing there. Even in the gospel of John we hear a disciple say, nothing good has ever come out of Nazareth. No. If God can use an immigrant girl in an occupied country who was pregnant before she was married, God can use you. God has always chosen the most humble of vessels from the most humble of places to give birth to his word. Mary had no rights; no power, and yet... No, your excuses will not work here. But here's a question for you: was Mary the first person asked to be the God-bearer, or only the first person to say yes? How many others said, "You've got to be kidding me."

And Mary yet she said yes. She said yes to incarnation. She said yes, not simply to a God who dwelt outside of her, beyond her, but yes to a God who desired to dwell within and through her. That is incarnational theology. God isn't just with us, but can be within us; distinct yet inseparable. This is what Mary's yes was about. She would participate in the divine and the holy, even as the holy and divine chose to participate in and through her.

And The same is true, not just of Mary, but of Moses and Deborah and Elijah and Esther. A messenger of the Lord comes and says, "Hail O favored one, you have been called by God to serve the Almighty." You've been called to undertake a journey and in the process your life will be changed forever.

But here's the thing folks. This message hasn't just been extended to Mary; it's been extended to me and you as well. Every single one of us is receiving an invitation this Christmas, not to a cocktail party, but to start establishing the world that Mary sang of in the Magnificat. Indeed, what good is it for Mary of Nazareth to give birth to the holy, if we ourselves are not willing to give birth to the holy here and now. The truth of the gospel is that human beings are tabernacles, containers of the holy. God wants nothing less than for us to become pregnant with divine possibilities and then to give birth to the holy and precious in our time.

Mary was confused. How can this be she asked? But, a powerless teenage girl said yes and opened herself to the divine and gave birth to a child destined to transform all of creation.

But that's Mary's story. What's yours. Do you say yes to God's intrusive invitations? Do you say yes to new horizons, new possibilities, new lives? Do you say with Isaiah, Here am I? Do you say yes to questions that are hazardous to what is? Will you give birth to the holy?

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Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

So back to where we started, why do Catholics and a handful of Lutherans and Anglicans cite the Angelus? The Angelus is traditionally recited in the evening at the close of evening prayer, and thus offers an opportunity for reflection at the end of the day. It asks: How we have responded, this very day, to God's call? We know how Mary responded, "Let it be with me according to your will." But what about you yourself; how have you responded? That is the role of the Angelus. It wants to know what are you doing to give birth to our Lord, here and now. Mary the first disciple has led the way. She said yes, she gave voice to Christ's vision. She followed. Now it's our turn. Do we have enough courage, enough gumption to do likewise? Amen.