

Advent 4 C
Luke 1:39-55
December 22, 2024

“There’s Something About Mary”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this 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. God’s mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with their arm; and 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 their servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy, according to the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’

~o~

Mary the mother of Jesus is given rather short shrift in most Protestant circles. The Bible tells us surprisingly little about her. Only the gospels of Luke and John ever give her voice, and only on four separate occasions.

But, when she speaks, she has something to say. The very first time we hear her, she's talking with the angel Gabriel. She asks one question about the life-altering proposition the heavenly messenger was there to deliver and then she agrees to be the mother of God's child. A few moments ago, I read the account of Mary's second communication – this one with Elizabeth. The third instance, a scolding, comes years later when the boy Jesus disappears to visit the Temple while the family headed back home. And the final instance comes nearly two decades after that when Jesus and Mary attended a wedding together, the wine ran out, and Mary pushes Jesus to perform what's commonly referred to as the first public miracle – turning water into wine.

Besides scant details placing her in the village of Nazareth in the province of Galilee, her identification as both a virgin and betrothed to a man named Joseph, and the naming of Elizabeth as her relative, the Bible offers no additional biographical details for Mary. And following the birth of her son, Mary's part in the story of Jesus' life and ministry recedes to that of a background character mentioned only a handful of times.

By the mid-2nd century, however, stories about Mary's early life were widely known and circulated. A popular volume among early Christians, the Protoevangelium of James reveals her to be the daughter of a wealthy older couple named Joachim and Anna. The document contains additional details about Mary's astounding ability to walk at the age of six months, her dedication at the Temple at three, and her engagement to a widower named Joseph at twelve. It also tells of the miraculous conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, his birth in a cave on the road to Bethlehem, and the perpetual virginity of Mary – before, during, and after Jesus' birth.

In the years that followed, further stories, legends, and doctrines about Mary came to light and she came to be venerated in her own right. By the 3rd century, the prayer known as the *Sub Tuum Præsidium*, one of the earliest Marian prayers was in use. A translation reads:

*We fly to thy protection,
O holy Mother of God.
Despise not our petitions in our necessities,
but deliver us always from all dangers,
O glorious and blessed Virgin.¹*

In 431 she was officially named the *Theotokos* – God-bearer or Mother of God – by the First Council of Ephesus. And in succeeding centuries, Marian theology and devotion blossomed among Christians in both Eastern and Western churches. Dating from the 12th century, the visionary abbess Hildegard of Bingen writes:

*Hail Mary,
O authoress of life,
rebuilding up salvation's health,
for death you have disturbed,
that serpent crushed
to whom Eve raised herself,
her neck outstretched
with puffed-up pride.
That serpent's head you ground to dust
when heaven's Son of God you bore,
on whom has breathed
God's Spirit.*

*O sweet and most beloved
Mother, hail!
Your Son
from heaven sent you gave unto the world.²*

¹ *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, Knightsoftheholyeucharist.com: <https://www.knightsoftheholyeucharist.com/sub-tuum-praesidium-prayer-download/>.

² Tr. Nathaniel M. Campbell. *Ave Maria, O auctrix vite*, Hildegard-society.org, September 4, 2014: <https://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/09/ave-maria-o-auctrix-vite-responsory.html>.

Even reformer Martin Luther maintained a robust devotion to Mary. Writing in 1521, he says:

*One should honor Mary as she herself wished and as she expressed it in the Magnificat. She praised God for his deeds. How then can we praise her? The true honor of Mary is the honor of God, the praise of God's grace...Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ...Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God.*³

Many of us here grew up in Catholic or Orthodox congregations where Mary featured much more prominently in the life and liturgy of the church. We likely even recognize the words from this morning's reading as a part of the *Ave Maria* or Hail Mary:

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

On the other hand, as I said when I began, Mother Mary is given rather short shrift by most Protestants. Our beliefs and traditions were fired in the cauldron of the Reformation and its reaction against all things "Romish," and further influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and Liberal Theology. I suspect that we at New England Church hold a wide variety of views about Mary, ranging from outright rejection of the Virgin Birth and divinity of Jesus to whole-hearted acceptance of both doctrines. Regardless, we tend not to talk much about Mary except at Christmas. Even then, we get the impression that she was little more than an incubator for a really special baby. And that's unfortunate; here's why.

At a time in which women had little personal agency, even little value, the Mary of Luke's gospel refuses to be one of them. Much like the other

³ Martin Luther. *Explanation of the Magnificat*, 1521.

examples of bold women in Luke, women like the Syrophenician woman and Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary stands in stark contrast to the nameless, voiceless, unremembered women of her time. She sings a vision of a world turning, of the proud scattered, the powerful brought down, and the lowly lifted up; of the rich sent away empty while the hungry are filled with good things; and divine intervention on behalf of her people. But she doesn't just sing.

In Luke's gospel, Mary uses the only thing she has at her disposal to affect the change she longs to see – her very body. She is to be seen as a willing participant in the divine plan to change the future of her people and her world, despite the risks to herself, her reputation, and her life. If there was any doubt about Mary's willingness, Mary's agency, Mary's autonomy, she sings those to rest: "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed," she says.

Guided by her vision, this Mary takes courageous action and offers her joyful contribution to the divine drama about to unfold. She would need all the strength she could muster to carry the child, all the grit she could summon to give birth, and then, all the tenacity and hope, wisdom and guidance and vision she could tap to raise him to be who he was meant to be. And she was equal to the challenge.

That's how real change happens. A dream, a vision fuels courage, motivates persistent action, not just once, but over the course of years. Tenacity and grit, wisdom and hope, patience and persistence – that's the stuff of changemakers. That's Mary. And Luke makes sure we see her, hear her, at the beginning with prophetic vision, and agency, and autonomy, and determination; gives us glimpses of her in the background throughout Jesus' ministry, and at the cross, and with the early church gathered in his name to continue his work. Mary was there for it all, working to bring heaven's dream to life. May we be satisfied with no less. Amen.