



## Sermon

Luke 1: (26-38), 46-55  
The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 16, 2007  
Historic St. George's UMC  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### There's Something About Mary

My grandmother, who was named Mary Day, had statues of "the blessed virgin" Mary all over her house and garden. My mind's eye can still see the pale blue veil covering the handmaid's head.

These figures were quite strange to Mary Day's Methodist grandson. In *my* church there were no such icons. In my back yard there were no grottos with plaster casts of the Mother of God. I asked my mother about this once. I don't remember what she said exactly but it was something like "We Protestants pay more attention to Jesus than a bunch of figurines, statues and saints."

Thank heavens my mother wasn't a spokesperson for the ecumenical movement.

Speaking of the ecumenical movement, a bunch of Roman Catholic and Protestant Scholars got together a few years back to examine what the New Testament and Christian tradition have said about Mary (*Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, Fortress Press, 1978). They concluded neither Catholic nor Protestant tradition have done Mary justice. A host of unbiblical, contrived doctrines going as far back as the second century are brought to light. For example, some ascetics around the third and fourth centuries (people repressing the desires of the flesh by living lives of austerity and self denial) ran so far afield with the whole idea of the virgin birth that chastity became a higher calling than marriage.

Then there is the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. It *must* be so, reasoned theologians, because the womb that bore Jesus could never bear any *other* common children. Saint Jerome, who translated the scriptures into Latin, was so outraged at the thought of Jesus having brothers and sisters, he insisted they must be cousins.

Add to this the notion that to bear the sinless Son of God and Savior of the world, Mary, dogmatists reasoned, had to be totally pure, blameless and whiter than new fallen snow – even after Jesus' birth. We're getting close to goddess status here.

I was in college when Michelangelo's *Pieta'* was attacked at its home in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. I remember the news. Someone took a hammer to this classic statue of Mary cradling the crucified Jesus, holding him like the day he was born. Her features were seriously damaged – one arm smashed off at the elbow, a chunk knocked off her nose and a chip at one of her eyelids.

Some said the attack was a parable for the violence done Mary by the church – by Roman Catholics who have elevated her to near idolatry and to Protestants who have ignored her and made her a prop dragged out with the Christmas crèche. I don't know about the use of the word "violence" to describe what we've done to Mary. But we sure have chipped away at her.

Let us be thankful we have Luke's witness to Mary for better perspective. Outside of the Gospel of John where she shows up most, Mark seems indifferent to her. Matthew's Mary is mute. In Luke we know her best for her song.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," she sings. Here is a girl unmarried and dirt poor who has recently been visited by an angel with a most peculiar message. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

Mary had every reason to run screaming from this angel, every reason to consider the heavenly messenger an Angel of Darkness as an Angel of Light. Having a child out of wedlock, pregnant by someone else when she is promised to Joseph – this was

enough to get her stoned for adultery. At the very least she would be rejected by her husband-to-be, her parents, her village. She would spend the rest of her days in even deeper poverty than where she started, struggling like any unwed mother struggles to keep herself and her child fed, clothed and housed.

But here's the thing. Mary doesn't reject God's preposterous plan to inhabit her womb. She goes off to see her cousin Elizabeth and breaks into song:

"My soul magnifies the Lord... I'm bursting with God. I'm dancing to the song of a savior. God took a look at me, poor and no-account that I am, and look what happened. I'm the most fortunate woman on earth. What God is doing with me will never be forgotten. Holy is God's name. God's mercy flows, wave after wave to those in awe of him. He bares his arm and shows his strength, scattering the proud, knocking the powerful off their high horses, pulling victims out of the mud. There's a banquet for the starving and the rich will wish they could get just in on it. Grace and mercy are piled on high. What God is doing is what God promised all along."

How can we hear this and not say, in the words of the movie title of a few years ago: *There's Something About Mary*. At least *some* of the something is her vulnerability to grace, her risk to welcome to the divine seed to her innermost.

To our way of thinking, vulnerability means weakness. We've all been in situations where someone had to back down – and no one wants to be the person who backs down. We strive for the things that give us all the best options. We want to determine the course of our lives. We want to call the shots. We avoid vulnerability fearing we will lose ourselves. Believing that surrendering ourselves to anyone could lead strength rather than weakness is ridiculous. Believing that yielding ourselves to strange and preposterous plans could possibly make us MORE ourselves than less ourselves is a leap of faith. And yet it is the leap of faith the Lord so often calls us to make.

This is what is so troubling and surprising about Mary's story. She seems so powerless to steer her own course in the

flood of events surrounding Jesus birth. Yet, as in so many people stories of the Bible, weakness and vulnerability are ways to more well-founded strength. Weakness and vulnerability make room for God there otherwise is no room.

God must not have seemed like much of a savior to Mary at first. She's fourteen and nauseated with morning sickness for heaven's sake. These are grounds for gagging not a song of praise magnifying God, unless you do what Mary does. C.S. Lewis talks about this kind of thing in *Surprised by Joy* – with a phrase that talks about going "further up and farther in," as he puts it, to gaze on God in the center of your soul.

Mary looks "further up and farther in" and sings from the heart of her soul. Mary has made herself vulnerable to grace. No wonder pregnancy is such a wonderful image for time of year. Jesus Christ is born in her, like Jesus Christ is born in every one of us who allow God to come to the heart of our souls, to inhabit our innermost, to risk trusting that heaven's image is born through us – muddle, mess, morning sickness, crazy dreams and all. Pregnant with God, the morning sickness and the tossing and turning about what's the right thing to do isn't as bad when you go "further up and farther in."

"My soul magnifies the Lord... I'm bursting with God. I'm dancing to the song of a savior..." sings Mary. There is gravity to Mary's joy. It reveals something else about being vulnerable to grace. Making ourselves vulnerable to heaven does not guarantee peace any more than Christmas is all comfort and joy. To the contrary, making ourselves vulnerable to grace insures there will be change, loss and grief – things we're not signed up for, thank you very much. With the seed of God growing in your belly – even more than going through the normal ages and stages in life – before anything finds its way back to normal, there is chaos. Giving ourselves over to God like Mary is difficult at first because we are guaranteed to lose some parts of ourselves we hold dearly. But, in the gestation of vulnerable grace, like pregnancy, those parts of us are transformed into something new.

Being vulnerable to grace can make us feel like strangers in our own land. God's ways, like it says in the Bible, are not our ways. When the Lord makes a home in us, we may feel temporarily like we have lost *our* hold on this world. But it never ends there. After the labor pains there is birth. After the groaning death of crucifixion there is resurrection. Like Paul says in so many ways "in Christ we are new creation, the old has past the new has come;" or [we are] ... "crucified with Christ, nonetheless [we] live, Christ lives in [us]."

But through it all – and here's the *something* about Mary – letting God make a home in you, letting God radiate from our deep center, heaven prevails.

I clip articles sometimes and throw them in my sermon file for use with texts where they might apply. Here's a headline stuffed in my Mary/Magnificat folder: "Mary Emerges as Significant Role Model for Today's Woman." How tragic. Half of us will miss what God gives us in the one who bears the divine to the world.

Discovering each day that we have trusted in people, systems and things that can't deliver, in need of some inspiration, hope, and source for the courage to bear God through our lives, we have Mary. *All of us* have Mary.

She is no goddess or blue-veiled statue gathering cobwebs on a bookshelf or off in some grotto we may not visit again until springtime. She is not the plastic figurine with a sweet face on the coffee table crèche

or dashboard. Mary is vulnerable to grace because she risks trust and believes God from deeply within. Mary is the genuine example of faith acted out and response to God's word. Is it any wonder the woman who, when the angel Gabriel came to her with the surprise that she was bearing God-with –us, said: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you say," is the very same woman whose son who would grow up and say in the face his sweating blood: "Not my will but yours be done."

Mary doesn't only give us Jesus, she helps us to take him more seriously. He doesn't just come from on high. He also comes from a woman like her.

If Mary's ears had been less keen and her soul less willing, she might not have understood. If her eyes had been able to see only the broad bold outlines of living on the run to Egypt or the trials, tragedy, rejection and hardship that would follow, she might not have sensed the divine presence or regretted God's word of grace and favor.

But she heard and responded. She opened herself to the vulnerabilities of grace.

There is indeed *something* about Mary. Her story reminds us that the oddest, most inglorious, weak, unprepared, exposed moments are packed with the annunciation of God's love and a magnification of holy surprise.

Amen.

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