

Mary, Mother of God

December 15, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. J. Michael Solberg

Texts: Luke 1: 26-38

(Introduction to the reading:) Many thanks to the choir for proclaiming that passage from the first chapter of Luke - Mary's song, known as the Magnificat. The second offering of scripture is also from the first chapter of Luke, the part of the story just *before* Mary's song, setting the stage for her words of rejoicing. For many of us, this reading from the first chapter of Luke is familiar. Perhaps too familiar. To help us hear it anew, more as a product of its own context rather than ours, I am going to use some fresh names and phrases today in my translation. Instead of the familiar Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, I will use the non-anglicized version of those names – Miriam, Yoseph, and Yesu. Then there is the Greek word “*parthenos*.” It's traditionally translated as “virgin” but that doesn't seem helpful in our context today. These days, the primary meaning of “virgin” is someone who has never had sex, with all sorts of puritan connotations of sexual purity, or in some quarters, naivety – it's all very different than the sex-positive vibe of today. But Luke isn't trying to highlight whether Miriam had had sex or not, but rather that she was a young woman, specifically, she was post-puberty but not yet fully married. For poor women, this time between puberty and marriage was likely a very short part of life. Given the custom of the time, Miriam's family likely betrothed her to Yoseph when she was 12, and the marriage was likely to take place about a year later. So Miriam was likely 12 or 13 as this story unfolded. Her virginity, as we think of it, was certainly taken for granted, but it is not the focus of the passage. With that, from the first chapter of Luke:

In the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist], the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to an as yet unmarried young woman betrothed to a man whose name was Yoseph. Yoseph was from the house of David, and the maiden's name was Miriam. And entering the place she was, the angel Gabriel said, “Hail, favored one, Almighty God is with you.” And she was hugely distressed at his words and considered what this greeting might mean. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Miriam, for you have found favor with God. And see: You will conceive in your womb and will bear a son, and you shall declare his name to be Yesu. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and Almighty God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob throughout the ages, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Miriam said to the angel, “How shall this be, as I do not yet have intimacy with any man?” And in reply the angel told her, “A holy spirit will visit you, and the wonderous power of the Most High will be with you; hence the one who comes from you will also be called holy, a Son of God. And look at your kinswoman Elizabeth: She also conceived a son, in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who had been called barren; because nothing, of all the things I have said, is impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold: the slave of the Almighty; may it happen to me as you have said.” And the angel departed from her.

Advent is something of a challenge for preachers. As much as we, and everyone, love this season, there is a sense that, well, we've done it all before. More to the point, it's all been said

before. That's especially true for this Sunday, when the choir has just helped us rejoice in the wondrous words of the Magnificat, Mary's revolutionary, yet beautiful song as Jesus grows within her. Taking advantage of the sermons available on our website (you should check them out sometime!), I've heard excellent, moving, and truthful, messages on the Magnificat from Dan and Carlyle and Carla. And many of you have heard many more such sermons here through the years. So, there is a sense that it's all been said, and here at First Church, it's even been said very well.

These sermons have emphasized the true nature of Mary's song. Although the European musical tradition, and the choir's offering today in Latin no less, makes the words melodious and beautiful, timeless and tender and comforting – as indeed, in a sense they should be – still, as the sermons here at First Church have said, the song of Mary is not really the stuff of concert halls, but of protest marches. God has scattered the proud (back at me)... and brought the powerful down... God has filled the poor... And cast the rich to the floor...

Four years ago, for example, standing right here during the COVID lockdown, preaching to an empty sanctuary and an online congregation, Dan Smith rightly said that these amazing Janet McKenzie banners helpfully remind us that the historical Mary was not a beautiful, gentle, white European, but a young woman of color, a peasant, first-century, Palestinian Jew from a podunk town (I'm sure with apologies to the very real and not at all insignificant Podunk, Massachusetts). Dan encouraged us to think of Mary's song as a punk rock anthem. He said, "Can we see Mary as that teenage rebel, enlisting in, as Broderick Greer has noted 'an underground scene of Hebrew resistance, envisioning an Israel free of occupation, and ultimately, a God who keeps God's promise of liberating God's people.'" The fact is 'Mary's song is no timid solo, but a loud, robust protest song. She, along with Elizabeth, is belting the first note of revolution.' And the fact is Christianity at its best is just such an underground scene, a resistance movement of liberation, of faith-rooted love and prayer activism that cries out from the margins with those living at the margins. If nothing else, I hope you can see what I mean by turning up the volume on the Magnificat this year, letting some of its edgier, grungier notes ring free. Our world needs her spiritually rooted defiant message now more than ever. And yet, its punk lives on and with it hope for a better future!"

Our brother preached it, right?! And those vivid words are important to hear again and again, and important to see, visually (motion to the banners), again and again.

And (not "but," rather "and"), and there is yet more to say. To be honest, it wasn't long ago that I wouldn't have had anything else to say. I've preached the Magnificat passage just that way many times, although likely not as well. And then, a few years ago, I read something by Sam Wells, a pastor and writer I deeply admire, currently the vicar of St. Martin in the Fields on Trafalgar Square. Sam Wells asked: And then what? (*This whole theme/direction is from Living Without Enemies, by Sam Wells and Marcia A. Owen.*)

Sam has long expressed some concerns about what we generally call work for "social justice," but which I would more theologically name as work to undo the effects of dehumanization. The work of social justice, of ending dehumanization in all its forms, is absolutely necessary, absolutely. Still, there is more to the message of the gospel. There is more to the story of Mary and her song.

Sam Wells puts it this way: What if we got what we wanted? What then? An end to racism, in all its many forms? Economic fairness for all, not just handouts, but the pride of a job well done, leading to enough for all. What if we got what we wanted? An end to the othering of LGBTQ people. An end to our caste system, and the millions of ways those in social and economic power keep others down. A reversal of climate change. Fixing our healthcare system. What if we got what we wanted? Well, it would be amazing, of course, it would be fantastic for all the world. But then what? What then would our faith be all about?

I'm not sure we ask this question too much today, but it has actually been at the core of the church's theological tradition for a very long time. If you think about it theologically, this is the question of the forgiveness of sin. All the problems of the world I just mentioned are connected to human sin. Racism, economic injustice, prejudice, despoiling this planet – it's all dehumanization, it's all sin. And what do we believe about sin? God forgives it. God forgives us. And in this *theological* register, I have quickly arrived back at the same question: what then?

Well, what happens then actually depends on how we think about forgiveness. And this is honestly where I think our theological tradition has gone seriously off track. Our default theology, and whether you think you have a default theology or not, you surely do, it's impossible not to. Our default theology conceives of forgiveness as something that happens to us from the outside. Whether it is the traditional Christian claim that Jesus made a sacrifice on the cross that paid off our debt, or a more secular sense just that God is love and doesn't hold anything against us, either way it's something that happens to us from the outside. To put it starkly, we are forgiven, but we are not changed. We will go on to sin again, and be back here, or in the self-help section, or in therapy, or calling for revolution, or all of the above, again, and again, and again, for we are not changed.

To put this in the context of social justice: it's like if we fixed everything, undid all the dehumanizing garbage we have created, then we'd just go on to do it again, or more likely find new, and even more subtle, ways to break it all apart again. So when forgiveness happens to us from the outside, the answer to the question, what then? is, sadly, "before long there will be more of the same."

If such forgiveness was actually what was happening in Jesus, then human history is just a cycle of us messing everything up, then us getting upset at ourselves that we have done so, then singing those protest songs, then maybe even fixing things for a while, and then it all starting again.

Our Christian faith actually provides an alternative to that terrible cycle. And the alternative comes from the story I read earlier about Mary, the mother of God. In Mary we see, perhaps more clearly than in any other place, that the forgiveness of God, the salvation of God, is not simply something that comes from the outside and remains external to us. It is rather something that enters into us, takes up a home in us, grows within us.

Simply, Mary becomes the mother of God, so that we too might have God within us.

Athanasius was one of the ancient teachers of the church. He wrote great stuff (and some terrible stuff, admittedly, as he was a person of his context). But most importantly, what

Athanasius is best remembered for is a line that has shaped Eastern Christianity for over 1500 years: God became human, so that what is human might become god.

Because God became human in Jesus Christ, entering into Mary, the mother of God, humanity is restored, not from without, but from within. God enters into God's very creature, and by that entering in, restores and builds up, offering grace from within the person, rather than without. (This and the following are taken from an essay about Athanasius by an Orthodox teacher, Archimandrite Irenei Steenberg, found here, <https://www.holycrossoca.org/newslet/1511.html>.)

And it is not simply grace. It is growing into our true identity. This is the notion of what the Eastern tradition calls deification, or *theosis* – God-being. God binds humanity to God's self. The restored creature is not one on whom God shines, but in whom God transfigures and transforms. In Christ, the Divine was made human, in order that humans might be made divine. God displayed God's self through a body, that we might receive the being of the invisible God. We don't become God, of course, we become the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all, but in Christ our very nature is changed to make us are, part of God's divine being. And if that is theologically scandalous to you (as it certainly would have been here for centuries here in the heart of Puritanism), just remember that we were created in the image of God – god is what we are meant to be.

God's response to all the dehumanization we spread around this world, the dehumanization of those created in God's image, is the making human in Mary of God's eternal son, Jesus. God becomes that which is messed up, human. For God, in ultimate grace, cannot be defeated. So by taking up the weak creature into God's own life, the creature inherits God's immortality. That which is the Son's, becomes the creature's. God becomes human, that humans might become god.

With this new perspective, I ask again, what then? If in Christ we are not externally forgiven but internally transformed into the very divine nature we were created to be, then when all the problems are fixed, we have each other to enjoy. We no longer have fixers and the fixed, the oppressed and the oppressor, the givers and the recipients, the generous and the grateful. We just have each other. We have the beauty of live lived together. We are able to regard the other, not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be entered, a love to be discovered. All our work to combat dehumanization doesn't bring about the change God desires, but it is a sign of the change God is after, and that God inaugurated in Mary's womb.

Mary, the mother of God. Mary's message is this: God's divinity has transformed my humanity – personally, economically, socially, politically, essence-ly, God is transforming my life the way pregnancy's transforming my body, making it full of promise and expectation and fertility and joy. And that's what Mary's saying to each one of us today. Are you allowing God's divinity to transform your humanity? Are you allowing the Holy Spirit to sing a song of joy and hope through you? (All this again from Sam Wells – a sermon at Duke Chapel on December 20, 2009, available at <https://chapel.duke.edu/2009-sermons-archive>). Are you ready, not only to fight dehumanization in all its forms, but to allow God's divinity to transform your humanity, and rejoice with all who are made and remade in the image of God?

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.