

Model of Faith, Mother of God

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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The Magnificat: Luke 1: 39-55

This is the Sunday set aside to lift up Mary with her song, the Magnificat, for the special role she plays in the Christmas story. For many reasons I want to help us appreciate Mary's role in the life of the church: because of the great years I enjoyed at Notre Dame, because of my years of interest with ecumenism and my service on the Synod's Committee for Ecumenical Concerns, and because of our special relationship with St. Paul's Catholic church. For these and other reasons I'd like to lift up the wonderful contribution Mary has made for the life of the church and the faith of many believers. Unfortunately, the harder I try the more difficult it becomes. You see, Protestants generally, and Lutherans, in particular, have a problem with Mariolatry. Calling the honor given to Mary among Catholics "Mariolatry" already signals the problem, which is turning the veneration of Mary into a level of worship that approaches idolatry.

Reform movements in the church, be they aimed at Catholic or Protestant traditions, have often taken aim at the growth of icons and mediators that try to soften the distance between God and us. Luther wanted to underscore how accessible God wants to be - and is, as our gracious, loving Father - and so he encouraged Christians to forego the saints, including Mary, and pray directly to God through Jesus. We don't need go-betweens and inside connections. God wants us to come to him directly in prayer, and Jesus' loving arms are forever a sign of God's inviting embrace. Among the Reformers, Calvinists were not quite so focused on God's grace as was Luther. I recall on a visit through the medieval village of Wells in the south of England how reformers there cut the heads off the statues lining Wells Cathedral. Why? Because their insistence on God's utter holiness and radical otherness turned those statues of the saints into graven images that had the effect of softening the unapproachable holiness that separates us from God Almighty.

The truth is that the growth in Mary's stature among Christians had roots in wanting to soften this harsh chasm of separation. Mary's role also grew in significance as doctrines developed around the divinity of Christ. Last week in Sunday School, for example, we noted that Saint Paul, who represents the clearest view we have of first generation Christianity, never appealed to any of Jesus' earthly life - except, of course, to the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the crucifixion on Good Friday, and the resurrection on Easter Sunday. But he never referred to Jesus' baptism or to his birth. He never appealed to Jesus' mother or father. Jesus' earthly life - and his mother's earthly life - were of no interest whatsoever in his proclamation of the Gospel.

Mark's Gospel saw that it was a major weakness not to require a connection between the Christ of faith and Jesus in history. So, he includes the story of Jesus' ministry among us to fill in the content of who Christ is and what it means to follow him. Matthew and Luke get the story of Jesus Christ the Son of God back to the moments of birth and conception - that, is, back to the doctrines of Virgin Birth and

Immaculate Conception. The Gospel of John, with its powerful prologue, makes it clear that whether we're speaking about the Christ of faith or Jesus in history, this Son of God is one with the Father in every respect, from the very beginning to the end of time, and beyond. The Word of God, God's very being and essence, was made flesh, and dwelt among us in the life of His Son, Jesus Christ. This conclusion led to other conclusions involving Jesus' father and mother. With God as His father, we needed to think of his mother differently, namely, as none other than the mother of God, a blessed Virgin, forever holy, set apart as God's hand-picked maiden, destined to become the softer side of our access to the full Godhead of the impenetrable Trinity. With the unfolding of history, the person of Mary comes out ever more approachable as the concept of the Trinity becomes increasingly complicated. I'd love to say more about Mary's rise in stature through the history of the Church, but the more I try, the harder it becomes. I had a most peculiar experience in Madrid a number of years ago, when Marilyn and I caught an e-saver flight from Pittsburgh to spend a few days in Spain in March. We caught an early glimpse of spring-like weather, and enjoyed an afternoon in the Prado, one of Europe's premier art museums. As many already know, Spain is home of the Inquisition, dated right about the same time as the Reformation in the 16th century. In fact, the Inquisition was Spain's counter-reformation. What Charles V was unable to do in Germany he accomplished in Spain. The Prado featured rooms and rooms of Flemish paintings and Renaissance art, with the softer qualities of the Blessed Virgin Mary filling the canvas of portrait after portrait. Mary had captured the imagination of artists across the centuries.

Their renderings were breath-taking. I know I *should have* felt the attraction of those soft hues on canvas. I should have responded to the hovering of angelic halos. I *should have* joined in the adoring expressions of the faces those graced to see her, but I couldn't see it. I wanted to see what others saw, but I just couldn't see it. Then it happened. By surprise, I wound up in a room devoted to German paintings, and there was Martin Luther, an original Lucas Cranach rendering of Martin Luther, making it plain to me that I had overdosed on Mary! It might be a Lutheran thing. But I was also struck by how cognitive a tradition Lutheranism is. It is a tradition whose identity was forged on theological debates with Catholics about grace and faith in one generation, and then with Calvinists about grace and faith in the next.

Mary really isn't about the head, but the heart. Her rise in stature in the traditions of Roman Catholicism was the result of the church embracing practices of piety that many religious communities held dear. Real people were finding inexpressible joy in the connection that focusing on Mary can inspire: that's where the elevated status of Mary originates. It isn't the conclusion of theological debate, but the actual piety and beloved practices of God's people. I'd like to feel it, but as a lifelong, committed Lutheran, I need this cognitive focus of theological arguments to take the lead. The truth is that I know religion is more than an intellectual exercise. The mind is important, but so is the heart, feelings that sustain our will to worship and serve. Our faith must attend to the full range of movement it inspires and requires - moving the mind to assent, moving the will to act, moving the heart to feel the love of God present in those people who make the story of salvation come alive - and Mary is surely one of those people, perhaps first in the line among those who made this story come alive, with the birth of Jesus as the Mother of God, as the blessed Virgin, whose inviting innocence surely knows the difficulties that arise on life's journey. Whether that journey be the road to Bethlehem or the way to Calvary, Mary knew the joy of Jesus' birth and the tragedy of his death. When you think about the depths of

humanity that can be explored by looking into the eyes, into the heart of Mary's simple believing, then it becomes clear why so many have found such love and devotion from looking to Mary as not just a witness to faith but as the Mother of God. I should see it. I should hear it in the songs that have been inspired by the Magnificat. But when I read this text I don't see the Mother of God. I see a young woman who was numbered among the poor and lowly, cutting a drastic contrast with the proud and powerful. I hear the refrains of the refrains of those inextinguishable Middle East hopes for the coming of a Messiah who will vindicate God's people by showing the strength of his arm militarily, politically, and religiously. I hear Mary's Magnificat echoing the Song of Miriam, with Moses' triumph over Pharaoh clearly in view and the victory refrain of Exodus resounding in the background: "I will sing to the Lord because he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has cast into the sea!" [Exodus 15:1] The Magnificat embodies and extends the rich heritage of expectation that makes the Middle East so maddening, with zealous militants clinging to an unwavering hope that has left all the great empires feeling like that first great power buried under the waters of the Red Sea.

Middle East militants have the same hope that inspired the freedom fighters that followed Moses, and then Joshua, continuing through the Maccabees, including many who found Jesus interesting. Jesus, as it turned out, had a different view of freedom, and a different vision of how to lead his followers to the promise land now known as the Kingdom of heaven. You can be the judge: I simply can't help myself. I wanted to focus on Mary, but there's so much more happening in the Magnificat. I know that I should have done better, but I can, at least, confirm this: that I am convinced, now more than ever, that there is much to learn from those dimensions of faith that our Roman Catholic counterparts explore with their interest in Mary as the Blessed Virgin forever holy because she has been set apart by God to serve in the role as a model of faith and the Mother of God. For Mary was the one who set in motion the movement that would arise around the name that is above every name, around the man whom we know as the Christ, the man whom we have chosen to follow, in the heartfelt desire to live our lives ... in Jesus' Name. Amen