

Mary: Inspiration or Obstacle to Your Faith?

Sermon on Luke 1

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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Today we enter into the Advent season of preparation for Christmas with the story of Mary. Hers is a story pregnant with possibilities, as this season of preparation grows pregnant with possibilities and hope.

Mary, the young Galilean woman who receives a calling from God to take on a unique and important role, is both faithful and fearful. She runs to the comfort of her older cousin Elizabeth to share the impossible news of her pregnancy and her vocation of mothering Jesus...even though she's a virgin!

In her Magnificat, Mary speaks some of the most poetic words of our whole Bible, proclaiming her faith in the God of justice for all - and the God of mercy, for all of us descendants of Abraham. (Read the Magnificat, Luke 1:47-55)

Who is Mary to you? If you grew up United Church, maybe she is a very peripheral figure? If you weren't brought up in a Christian denomination, maybe you're curious about this woman? If your roots are Catholic, she probably has a big place in your childhood faith. I grew up kneeling to pray in front of statues of Mary, because my mom felt somehow 'more heard' when she prayed through a woman.

I know this 'praying to Mary' clangs of idolatry to protestant ears - including mine now - but maybe Mary can have a role in our faith journeys, especially in this season of her pregnancy with the Christ light!

Wherever your faith roots, you probably have some opinion about the 'virgin birth' debate. That is 'something about Mary' that the Christmas story keeps confronting us with...especially if we have kids of an age to ask questions!

How do we work with the Virgin Mary? For young children who naturally believe literally the stories they are told, the Virgin Mary may be a shining mom who doesn't need a dad. Perhaps she is a reassuring, inspirational figure in single-mother-headed families today?!

For older kids and adults who are rational concrete thinkers, the Virgin Mary's story may be just silly. In our discussion about her a couple of weeks ago, it was clear that to some folks she is undoubtedly an embarrassing obstacle to saying they are Christian. They would as soon be rid of her. After all, unlike Jesus, she didn't really do anything with her life, that we know of! (If you don't count being a mother!)

If you're a feminist, perhaps you appreciate Mary as the female leading lady of Christianity - at least there is one central woman honoured in our religion! Hildegard of Bingen, the inspiring mystic who upheld ecological thinking and feminism in Christianity way back in the 12th Century, envisioned Mary the 'Godbearer' as a mirror of God's beauty and Creation, reflecting on all womanhood. I heard recently that some Catholics are actually petitioning Rome to have Mary declared Jesus' equal. Imagine?!

Do you know that Mary's early prominence in Christianity was partly to appease women by preserving elements of their ancient goddess worship, amidst otherwise patriarchal Christianity? But today, Mary's status amongst feminists is double-edged. When she is portrayed as the glorification of virginity, some would say 'a sexless caricature of motherhood,' her impossible ideal of the feminine has sparked abuse of women - the dangerous dichotomy of virgin or whore.

If you are an investigative thinker, then maybe you've gotten around the virgin birth obstacle with language. You've discovered that there is a debate about the translation of the Hebrew adjective used to describe Mary in the Bible....the word that came to us translated as 'virgin' is actually better expressed as 'adolescent girl,' describing her status and stage in life - without any implications about her

sex life - or lack of it. And if you're inclined to read history, you've probably heard that there are quite a suspicious number of famous figures around Jesus' time who claimed to be born of virgins - like Augustus and Alexander. hmmm?

If you take your Bible literally, Mary is the miraculous mother and her story is evidence of God's active intervention in the world, to make the impossible possible for the faithful.

If you are a metaphorical thinker, the Mary myth is an inspiration to trust that the Spirit in us does grow and give birth to new light. Meister Eckhart, another Christian mystic of the 13th Century, wrote that "the virgin birth is something that happens within us. It is the story of Christ light born within us, through the union of the Spirit of God and our flesh." That is what we are all pregnant with. In the Christmas season, we are all - female and male - Godbearers. With the potential to give birth to new light in the darkness of our world.

So who is Mary to you? What meaning do you make of her story? What gift does she give to you? How can her character develop yours? Or your sons and daughters?

To make the most of our Christmas season of preparation, perhaps we can make the most of Mary. Reflect on what she might have to teach you. Feel what you feel, relating to Mary. Get pregnant with her story and see what you might give birth to!

In a book called "Kneeling In Bethlehem," Ann Weems offers a poem to open our imaginations to Mary:

Mary, Nazareth Girl:

What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?

What did you know of men
when you found yourself with child?

What did you know of babies,
you, barely out of childhood yourself?

God-chosen girl:

What did you know of God
that brought you to the stable
blessed among women?

Could it be that you had been ready
waiting
listening
for the footsteps
of an angel?

Could it be there are message for us
if we have the faith to listen?