

**Mary, the Mother of Jesus**  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
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Of all the faces at the manger, the most familiar is that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is center stage in the Christmas story- this young peasant girl from Nazareth in Galilee who was chosen to be the means by which God's Word becomes flesh to dwell among us. She has been a favorite subject of artists across the centuries. She is depicted in one of three postures: grieving over her dying son, gazing with gladness at her newborn son, or, as we find her in the Annunciation scene from the Gospel of Luke, listening incredulously as Gabriel breaks the news that she, a virgin, will conceive in her womb and bear a son and name him Jesus.

In Da Vinci's depiction of this, the most pivotal conversation in all of Scripture, Mary sits with her right hand on the loom at which she has been weaving. She holds her left hand palm up in the air before Gabriel's face, as if to say...What does that hand say? Is she greeting the angel and the unexpected turn of events he announces, or is she protesting, "Wait just a minute here! None of what you are saying makes a bit of sense to me." Gabriel kneels before her, his brown wings at rest upon his back after his long flight from the high heavenly places. His head is bowed, his eyes alive with hope. He, along with God and all of creation, waits with breathless suspense to hear what Mary's answer will be. (1)

Some would say that Mary didn't have a choice to make. After all, the Gabriel side of the conversation consisted solely of simple declarative sentences. The Lord is with you. You have found favor with God. You will conceive. You will bear a son. The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David, and of his kingdom, there will be no end.

But notice how Mary pushed back. “How can this be?” she asked. Barbara Brown Taylor captures well what must have been going on in Mary’s mind. “She wanted to know exactly whose idea it was and exactly how it would happen. She wanted to make sense out of what made no sense: that God had decided to surrender himself to flesh and blood but needed her help, needed her surrender as well in order to make possible his own.” (2)

Respectfully, Gabriel offers the information she asks for, that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the Most High will overshadow her, two statements which, to my mind, raise a lot more questions than they answer, but they were enough for Mary, who had the last word: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

You may disagree with me, but I don’t think it was a done deal. Yes, God chose Mary. Why? We have no idea. Nowhere is it written that she was an exceptional person. She certainly had no social, economic, or religious status. Leonardo Da Vinci dresses her in a beautiful rose-colored gown with an elegant robe lined in gold draped across her lap. But, in the Biblical story, she was an impoverished peasant woman betrothed to an honorable but uneasy man named Joseph who lived in the rural backwater of a small, colonized country. What is outstanding about God’s choice of Mary is that she was **not** a person of privilege or power. How does Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise in human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (I Cor. 1: 26ff)

Mary’s very ordinariness is what I find to be the one of most awesome aspects of this whole story. God’s summons to play a part in the drama of salvation is not reserved for special people. “Hail, of Favored One,” Gabriel says to Mary. Peter Gomes explains the salutation this way:

“The angel means to say to her that she is chosen not because of her special grace and quality but rather that she is full of grace and filled with favor because she is chosen by the will of God.” (3) But oh, what a good choice God made in Mary. What a strong role model she is for men and women of all ages and stations in life. She shows us how to allow ourselves to be chosen for a life we did not necessarily intend to lead. We can either get under the bed when the unexpected happens or wring our hands and say this was not what I planned to be doing at this stage of my life, or we can choose to accept the change of plans with grace and dignity, letting God write the script. (4)

She shows us how to be God’s partner in our time and place, bringing God’s word to life, bearing God’s promises for the well-being of the world. The Eastern church has a beautiful word for Mary. They know her a “Theotokos,” meaning “the God-bearer.” Mary is the only one in whose womb the baby Jesus grew. (5) She is the only one who gave birth to him. The only one who nursed him at her breast, the only one who raised him to be the man he was. Yet, is not each of us called to like Mary, who pushed through her fear and doubt, and said to God, “Alright, let’s do it!”

It’s a shame really how infrequently we Protestants even talk about Mary. We do not worship her or pray to God through her, but, what we miss by not knowing her. The story is told that when the late dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London died, and was ushered into heaven, Jesus came down from the right hand of God and said, “Ah, Dean, welcome to heaven. I know you have met my Father, but I don’t believe you have met my mother.” (6)

Several years ago, a Catholic friend gave me a framed black and white photograph she had taken of a statue of the Virgin Mary on one of her trips to Italy. I keep the photograph just to the right of my desk in my study. Light from a window shines diagonally across Mary’s face and hands.

Her eyes seem to embrace all who stand before her with love. Her arms are lifted in a gesture of welcome and comfort. I look at her, and I know that she knows the secret of being human better than anyone who has ever lived, with the exception of her son. I sense too that she knows the heart of God better than anyone except her son.

What a paradox she is, a virgin and yet a mother, a lowly woman who occupies the most revered position in the history of our faith, a servant of the Lord, and yet a whole strong person in her own right.

In the Catholic church, 17 festival days are devoted to her and fifty hail Marys are included in the Rosary. When the Atlanta Falcons play the Chicago Bears tonight, in Chicago, it could be that one team will be behind as the clock is running out in the fourth quarter. They could be completely out of options except for one. You know what I am talking about: the Hail Mary pass. Michael Vick drops backs, throws the ball, and everything is changed.

If you will indulge the analogy, that is exactly what happens when Mary agrees to drop back from her life as it is and trust God to do something that is apparently impossible. She changes everything. Before Mary, the world floundered without hope. Because of Mary's courage, notice I did not say submission but courage, the Messiah came into the world, and of his kingdom there will be no end. In other words, nothing is impossible with God.

In Mary's song of praise called by the church, The Magnificat, she takes no credit for the turning of the tide of history. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sings, "and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked with favor upon his the lowliness of his servant..." She goes on to look at the hard cruelty of the world in the context of the saving grace of God. "God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation... The Lord has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful. He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

She could have said no, that Mary, but she didn't. No wonder the poor and the outcast and the lonely and the fearful have identified with her for 2,000 years. She was one of them. She was the bearer of hope for all of them.

Tom Long describes a black and white photograph that hangs on the wall of the museum of the concentration camp at Dachau. "It is of a mother and her little girl being taken to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. The girl, who is in front of her mother, does not know where she is going. The mother who walks behind, does know but there is nothing she can do to stop the tragedy that is about to unfold. In her helplessness, she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hand over her little girl's eyes so she will not have to see the horror that faces her. When people see the photograph in the museum, they do not move easily or quickly to the next one. You can feel their emotion, almost hear their cries, 'O God, don't let this be all there is. Somewhere, somehow, set thing right.'" (7)

Hail Mary full of grace. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus, who came to earth to set things straight. Truth be told, it's not perfect yet, but God is here now, doing battle with the forces of evil and cruelty, now and every day until they are vanquished once and for all. Thank God there once lived a woman who laid her weaving aside and took up the task of salvation.

#### Notes

- (1) John Stendahl, "Mary Said Yes," *Living By the Word*, Chalice Press, 2005, p. 12.
- (2) Barbara Brown Taylor, "Mothers of God," *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, 1995, p. 151.
- (3) Peter J. Gomes, *Sermons*, William Morrow and Company, 1998, p.11.

(4) Taylor, p. 152

(5) Ibid.

(6) Gomes, p.10.

(7) Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, CS.S. Publishing Co., Inc, 1987, p 36.