

THOROUGHLY MODERN MARY

³⁹*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,* ⁴⁰*where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* ⁴¹*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit* ⁴²*and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* ⁴³*And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"* ⁴⁴*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.* ⁴⁵*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."* ⁴⁶*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,* ⁴⁷*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,* ⁴⁸*for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;* ⁴⁹*for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.* ⁵⁰*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.* ⁵¹*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.* ⁵²*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;* ⁵³*he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.* ⁵⁴*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,* ⁵⁵*according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."* ⁵⁶*And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:39-56, NRSV)*

Like everyone, I find myself in dire straits from time to time. And yes, I find myself praying more when the going gets rough. People use different names when they pray. Some pray to God the Father while others pray to God the Mother. Some pray to Jesus while others pray to the Spirit. I just mostly pray to God. It seems to cover all the necessary bases. One thing I've never done in all my praying is pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Growing up Baptist I was taught that one of the many mistakes that Roman Catholics made was praying to Mary. During seminary I learned to appreciate the Roman Catholic Church on many fronts and learned that I had been misinformed about their views of Mary. It is not that Catholics pray to Mary as a divinity almost equal to Jesus. Rather, Mary is at the center of the Catholic view of the communion of saints. Basically Catholics talk to Mary on the basis of her relationship to Jesus. Imagine a scenario where you want the help of a VIP, only you find this very important person difficult to talk to. His mother on the other hand, is down to earth and would be happy to pass your request along to him. This is historically how many Roman Catholics viewed the relationship between Mary and Jesus.

After all, in the Middle Ages, the Church emphasized God's wrath and even Jesus was viewed as more distant and harsh.¹ According to Mark Burrows, a seminary professor at Andover Newton Theological School, "Mary, therefore, was regarded as the approachable one. 'Truly our sister' — that was her persona... 'The Middle Ages also were a period when everything about church structure was patriarchal, but the church was very much matriarchal in its piety and devotion'... nearly every Gothic church was built to honor Notre Dame, 'Our Lady.' 'What a lot of students don't understand is Mary is not the 'mediator of salvation,' but she is the 'mediator of access,' in the medieval understanding of God," Burrows says. 'There's something very practical about

getting the `mom` involved' ... All the priests and bishops were male, and the church ruled with a heavy hand. But the Gospel's imperatives to love, to care, to serve were 'overwhelmingly shaped by the maternal images of Mary,' [Burrows] says."²

Everything changed with the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation. A kinder, gentler, more approachable Jesus emerged. Protestants began viewing Jesus as the mediator with God. Thus Mary all but disappears from Protestantism.³

Peter Gomes tells a joke about a Protestant theologian at the pearly gates. The Protestant theologian meets Jesus who makes appropriate introductions saying, "Ah, professor, I know you have met my father, but I don't believe you know my mother."⁴

What are modern Mainline Protestants to make of Mary? Protestants of all stripes have been reevaluating their views of Mary in recent years. "Arguments on ... [Mary's] behalf have appeared in a flurry of scholarly essays and popular articles on the covers of the usually conservative *Christianity Today* (headline: THE BLESSED EVANGELICAL MARY) and the usually liberal *Christian Century* (headline: ST. MARY FOR PROTESTANTS)."⁵ Mary was even the cover story of the March 21, 2005 *Time* magazine.

If we're open to the lessons of Mary's life on this Christmas Eve day, we just might find inspiration to become more faithful followers of her son, Jesus. While Mary is most often lauded for saying "yes" to God, we should note that she was equally capable of saying "no." According to Peter Daino, "She says no during the visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, when Mary sings the Magnificat. In that bold proclamation Mary says no to the mighty on their

thrones...She says no to the oppressor who exploits the poor and hungry.”⁶

Elizabeth Rankin Geitz reminds us that Mary traveled an untrodden path. “Mary becomes a disciple because she hears the word of God, believes it, and acts on that belief. Mary becomes the first disciple, indeed the first Christian, by hearing the good news of Jesus’ identity as Messiah and God’s son, and by accepting it.”⁷

In his book, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, Jaroslav Pelikan writes that ““One of the most profound and most persistent roles of...Mary in history has been her function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, other religions.”⁸ Mary can even help us build bridges with Islam. “Mary is one of the most important women in the Qua’ran; she is numbered among the faithful who constitute the great prophetic tradition of belief. The Qua’ran explicitly teaches the Virgin birth, and includes stories that are familiar to Christian readers, such as the annunciation of the angel Gabriel. Some Muslim commentators have noted that the place Mary occupies in the Qua’ran is more important than any other woman in the line of biblical tradition, more than even the [Prophet Mohammad’s] own mother. Pelikan points out that only one...chapter in the Qua’ran bears the name of a woman in its title...[number 19], entitled Maryam.”⁹

Mary’s most admirable quality remains her steadfast faith in God following Gabriel’s announcement that she will bear a son named Jesus. She finds the news startling to say the least, and in her confusion asks how this can be. Gabriel assures Mary that she has been chosen to participate in one of God’s greatest miracles, the arrival of the long awaited Messiah. At the end of his announcement Gabriel sums it up saying, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37), words Jesus himself echoed some 30 years later. How

would Mary respond? Would she respond with skepticism and doubt? Or would she open her heart to receive God's good news? As we know, she responded with faith.

When I read this story, I can't help but wonder what would have happened if Mary had said no? God gives us freewill, so presumably Mary could have said, "Thanks, but no thanks." What then? Would God have gone in search of a more willing candidate for mothering the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Or was God looking for a certain kind of person in the first place, a person whose spiritual depth and open heart made her likely to say yes? I'm guessing the latter, that God wanted Jesus nurtured in a loving, spiritual home so as to prepare him for his ultimate mission on earth.

It was a tall order and no doubt Mary wondered if she was up to the task. But she had just heard the angel promise her that nothing was impossible with God so she responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). Mary rightly understood that she was God's servant, that her role as a human being was to do God's work, and if this was God's desire for her, then it was her desire as well.

Many argue, rightly so, that we need to keep Christ in Christmas, but we need to keep Mary in Christmas as well for Mary and Jesus are eternally linked. Through Jesus, we have a permanent connection to Mary. After all, the baby she nursed on that starry Bethlehem night was none other than the long awaited Messiah.

*What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while
shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard
and angels sing:*

*Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the
son of Mary.*¹⁰ AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

Advent IV

December 24, 2006

The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have given us so many good gifts: a beautiful world in which to live, joyous music to lift our hearts, beloved families and friends to share this life, and most of all the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. As we recall his lowly birth in this sacred season, may we feel deep in our souls the true significance of Christmas: the gift of Jesus to people everywhere. As we receive your love, help us respond with gifts of our own. Inspire us to share with the hungry, the refugee, the homeless. Guide our hopes and dreams that together we might build a better, more peaceful world. Encourage us to share our sorrow and sadness with you, O God, knowing how deeply you care for each of us.

We thank you, dear God, for the joy and delight of Christmas, through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

¹ J. Bennett Guess, “The Invisible Protestant Mary,” *United Church News* December/January 2007, p. A10

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Time*, March 21, 2005, p. 64

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 63

⁶ Peter Daino, S.M., *Mary: Mother of Sorrows, Mother of Defiance*

⁷ Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, “Mary: God’s Co-Creator of the New Adam and the New Israel,” *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 2001, p. 47.

⁸ Dale T. Irvin, “Mary: A Bridge Builder to Other Traditions,” *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 2001, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “What Child Is This,” lyrics by William C. Dix