

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

Psalm 89:1-4; 19-26

Luke 1:26-45

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Last Sunday we were reintroduced to John the Baptist, that stern prophetic voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

This morning we're being reintroduced to another key player who prepared the way for Christ's coming, Mary of Nazareth, a young woman, possibly 16 years old, who bravely accepted God's calling to be the mother of God. But today we're also being reintroduced to John the Baptist through his expectant mother, Elisabeth who conceived John in her womb just six months before the Holy Spirit conceived the Christ child in Mary's womb.

Doesn't this narrative speak to you about God's mysterious, unfolding plan for our salvation? John the Baptist is first introduced as the child leaping in his mother's womb, when Mary, pregnant with the Christ child, greeted her cousin Elisabeth. Consider that: John's and Jesus first encountered each other before either of them was born. Talk about God's mysterious ways!

I've often wondered whether these two cousins befriended each other during their childhood because none of the four gospels give any indication they ever met again until that day Jesus came to John for baptism. Even so, it's made abundantly clear each was fully aware of the other's importance, especially when John proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

But enough about John, because the gospel lesson for this fourth Sunday in Advent is really all about Mary, the fiancé of Joseph of Nazareth and the mother of Jesus. What we know about Mary is confined to only a few brief passages in the four gospels. Other than that we don't know anything about her childhood or her relationship with her parents, but we are given a definite insight into her personality and faith.

But before reviewing what we know about Mary, let's put to rest what Reformed Christians don't believe about Mary. One of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church teaches Mary was born without sin, that is, Mary was immaculately conceived. Protestants reject this because there's absolutely nothing even hinting about Mary's immaculate conception in the Bible. Besides that, reason would argue if Christ couldn't be born to a sinful woman, then all of Mary's ancestors would've had to be immaculately conceived as well.

What does bring Reformed Christians and Roman Catholics together is the virgin birth, that is, the seed of the Christ Child was miraculously conceived in Mary's womb

through the Holy Spirit. Having said that, there are some Reformed Christians who don't subscribe to the virgin birth because, they point out, Matthew misquoted Isaiah's prophecy, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son," because in the original text Isaiah used the Hebrew word "maiden," not "virgin." Presbyterians aren't obligated to believe this particular doctrine, but as I always say when commenting on the subject of miracles, "If God wants to suspend the laws of nature to get our attention, what's going to stop him?"

As I said earlier the Bible reveals little about Mary's life, but what can be gleaned from the gospel narrative is a sense of Mary's character and faith.

Compare Mary's readiness to accept her calling to be the mother of the Christ Child to Moses trying to worm his way out of leading the Hebrews out from slavery in Egypt. Moses argued with God, piling up one excuse after another why he didn't have the right stuff. Mary on the other hand immediately consented saying, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be according to your word," (Luke 1:38) even though being unmarried and pregnant would shame her family and possibly lead to her being stoned to death. True, her instantaneous response could have been a by-product of adolescent moxie, but her spoken reply to Gabriel revealed her steadfast faith and gratitude for being chosen to be the mother of God.

It was after Gabriel's visitation that Mary quickly set out to the Judean town in the hill country where her cousin Elisabeth lived; already knowing the timing of both their pregnancies was part of God's plan. It was then and there Elizabeth's son leapt in his mother's womb and being filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb...and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord (Luke 1:43...45)

Obviously both Mary and Elisabeth were celebrating more than their pregnancies. They were especially aware of God being up to something huge and their two sons would be essential players in the developing drama that promised to change everything. But surely neither of them could foresee both their sons would pay the ultimate price.

This is the last we hear about Elisabeth. Being "elderly" it's entirely probable she died before John reached adulthood, so we'll never know what she thought and feared, especially when John ended up on the second King Herod's hit list. But we do know what Mary thought and felt, at least at the start of her son's ministry in Galilee. In Mark's gospel we read when Mary and her children got wind of Jesus becoming an itinerant rabbi claiming the power to teach and heal, they went out looking for Jesus to bring him back home because the neighbors were saying Jesus was out of his mind. His younger brothers probably looked on Jesus as an embarrassment; surely Mary was terribly distraught and worried. Jesus himself may have been put out by his family's attempt to silence him because when his family finally found Jesus and he was told, "Your mother and brothers and sisters are standing outside asking for you," Jesus looked

around the room at his followers and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister and my mother.” (Mark 4:34-35)

There’s no indication Mary heard Jesus say these things but if she did, it had to hurt and make her even more perplexed, a far cry from her spiritual high on the night of his birth when she “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart,” after hearing the shepherds’ report of the angels proclaim the Savior’s birth. Obviously Mary, like everyone else, had a hard time comprehending her son’s calling to be the Crucified Christ. But her love for her son and her faith in God sustained her, because Luke later reports Mary was present with the Apostles in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to empower them all to spread the Good News.

So, what can we say about Mary? Certainly she had an unusual ability to trust God when she bravely went through with her pregnancy but she wasn’t supernatural, semi-divine or immaculately conceived. Like all of us, she had her ups and downs but in the end she came full circle joining with the apostles to spread the word. Obviously, Mary was full of grace, found favor with God and nurtured the Christ Child from childhood through adulthood. Mary was an essential player and she played her part as no one else could. Mary is one of the great saints of the Church.

I personally appreciate the Reformed Christian interpretation of Mary, that is, even though she was an extraordinary woman she was basically like the rest of us. I think that makes Mary more approachable. She’s not a plaster saint, she’s one of us, and because she’s one of us she becomes a great role model who can teach us about responding in faith like no one else.

First, Mary teaches us how to trust God even if it means putting ourselves at risk. Sometimes God asks us to do seemingly impossible things that overwhelm our sensibilities and fill us with fear. Watch Mary closely and see how she allowed God to overcome her fears and not only accepted her calling, but felt honored and blessed to be used by God. Her example keeps us from seeing God’s will as a distraction, an inconvenience and a cost too high to pay. Mary’s example teaches us the joy to be had when we allow God to stretch us to the limit as we prepare the way for Christ’s coming for the people God sets in our paths. Mary shows us that through self-sacrifice and reordering our priorities we are enriched, transformed and truly blessed.

But probably the most important lesson we can learn from Mary is allowing Christ to be born and nurtured in us. True, only Mary was chosen to bear the Christ Child in her womb, but all of us are able to bear the Christ Child in our hearts, nurturing and protecting his holy presence to redirect and enrich our lives by becoming Christ-like as the miracle of the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling within us full of grace and truth.

The next time we meet again, Christmas Eve, we’ll come together to welcome and worship our new born King. Let every heart prepare him room so his way will continue to be prepared through lives offered up to him.