

“There’s Something About Mary”

Luke 1:26-38

The Scripture passage for the day, popularly known as the “Annunciation of the Lord,” is one of the most surreal in all the Bible. It portrays God’s work through the most ordinary of people. It describes God choosing not a queen or princess, no one of great wealth or fame to carry his Child, God’s Child. But instead the Lord Almighty chooses among all people throughout the ages a poor, unmarried, Jewish girl engaged to a carpenter. That’s whom God chose for this mighty and holy work, . . . someone ordinary.

Then again, why should we be surprised?

God chose a boy shepherd, the youngest of a line of brothers, to be anointed King of Israel generations before. It is through his line that Jesus would be a descendant.

God chose a rebellious runaway to warn a city about its self-destructive sin.

God chose the youngest son of Jacob to be Landlord of Egypt;

He chose an unlikely woman to general Israel’s army to drive out the Cannanites;

He chose a stuttering Hebrew exile to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery;

God chose fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples;

He allowed a prostitute to pour perfume upon His feet and anoint Him;

and he ordained the chief persecutor of Christians to become the greatest leader of the early church.

Why, then, should we be surprised that God would choose an ordinary Nazarene girl to bear his Son? This is how God works. God, from his majestic throne of heaven, looks over the earth and ordains this occurrence, its time, place, and person – all seemingly, at least in our eyes, so ordinary.

You can see its unfolding through the literary movement of our passage. It’s a movement, like a search on GoogleEarth, from general to specific: from God to a city, of Galilee, Nazareth, to a virgin, betrothed to a man named Joseph, to Mary. And we as readers are allowed, in a sense, to follow the trail of the angelic messenger from the heavens to this ordinary room and ordinary girl. But through all of this we have to see, *there is something about Mary.*

Perhaps we as Baptist Protestants have made Mary too plebian, too ordinary. Perhaps we have demoted Mary in our anxiousness to separate ourselves from the Catholic veneration of her almost to the level of divinity. Robert McCracken noted years ago his observation that of 433 Catholic churches and chapels in Rome, 121 of them were dedicated to Mary, but only 15 dedicated to Jesus Christ.

Catholics have bestowed titles upon Mary such as “Most Holy Mary,” “Virgin Mother of God,” “Mother of the Word Incarnate,” “Mother of Mercy,” “Queen of Heaven,” “Advocate of Sinners,” “Dispenser of Divine Grace,” “Door of Heaven and Intercessor,” and “Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

Through the centuries they have developed doctrines about Mary such as her Perpetual Virginity – that she had no other children in her lifetime, the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception – that Mary was sinless from the moment of conception. Then there's the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary – that Mary bodily ascended into heaven, so holy is Mary to that Christian tradition.

And Catholics throughout the ages report dramatic stories of Mary sightings and images appearing in various forms. They say their prayers to her in the Ave Maria. These actions, to them, are holy acts of God. For them, *there certainly is something about Mary.*

We Baptists along with our other Protestant partners, on the other hand, get a little squeamish at this kind of Marial veneration. We don't read about these titles or dogmas in the Bible. In fact, as Leslie Flynn has pointed out, we can only read of Mary from a subordinate spot.

Just prior to performing His first miracle at the wedding in Cana, Jesus firmly replied to his mother when she informed him the wine had run out, "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come!" (John 2:3). This answer, while not harsh, does show a sense of distance.

Then we can remember that time that Jesus' mother and family were seeking him. And what did Jesus say? "Who is my mother or my brothers?" Then he looked around the room at those sitting with him and he said, "Behold my mother and my brothers! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and my mother."

Then, another time, Jesus was preaching to a crowd when a woman called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." And Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

Then we read countless episodes where the sick, the lame and blind all come to Jesus to be healed. They don't come to Mary! Then there is the dying thief on the cross who requests forgiveness. But he doesn't ask Mary who was still at the foot of the cross. No, he too asks Jesus!

Even the last scene in our Scriptures which records Mary's presence is one after the resurrection but before Pentecost. Here is a picture of the mother of Jesus praying to Jesus along with the disciples, who likewise are praying to Christ, not to her.

These are the episodes that we Protestants read in the Bible. But I wonder if we have not swung the pendulum from one extreme to the other. For *there's something about Mary.*

Perhaps she deserves a little more recognition than we have given. The Bible does tell us that when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, he exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women," and "You have found favor with God."

Then in her Magnificat which follows this Scriptural passage, Mary prophesied that “Henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.”

And so with all of this, weighing in the facts that she was probably quite poor, quite young, uneducated, unmarried, and all else; even with all of this, we have to admit that *there’s something about Mary.*

But what is it about her? Let’s look again at the story in Luke. It says that the angel Gabriel went to Nazareth in the hill country of Galilee. George Mason compares it to, maybe, like living in Appalachia: “off the beaten trail and maybe the last place anyone would have guessed to look for the mother of the Messiah.”

This is the picture that appeals to us Protestants. Mary did not have worldly credentials that outshined her peers. Instead, Mary is made accessible to all of us. She was no wealthy blue blood from Jerusalem who never got her hands dirty and saw to it that the King of Kings would be born in the purple silk swaddlings in a palace. No, this mother of the Immanuel, of God with Us, was poor and probably had rough hands from winnowing and grinding grain, from doing household chores customary to her gender and time and position in life, doing the family laundry near the public well and carrying water pitchers on her head. No, this Mary had her child in a stable and laid him on hay in a feeding trough. That’s a picture we like of Mary. For if we think Mary earned the favor of God by virtue of her virtue alone, what hope is there for any of us? We could not identify with her because we would all be inferior to her.

But then we are all faced again with Gabriel’s words of Annunciation. It starts off with the *Ave Maria* – Latin for the *Hail Mary*. This is not just something done by Cordell Stewart, Doug Flutie, or Baylor quarterbacks at the end of every game! No, the first Hail Mary came from God’s Messenger who said: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.* And everyone one of you in the room who grew up Catholic will remember that the next words come from Elizabeth to her cousin: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.* But the question really is, why is she blessed? Why is she favored so that she should be the mother of the Lord?

Mary is full of grace either because she has proved to God her gracefulness or because God has made her graceful. Is Mary worthy of God’s favor, or has God made Mary worthy by bestowing favor upon her? This is the rub between the Catholic emphasis on being faithful like Mary and the Protestant view that it is the Christ inside of her that makes her faithful.

But do we really have to make such a choice between the two views?

Isn’t there truth in both? Or, as another preacher put it,

Isn’t light both particle and wave? Doesn’t it take two to tango? When you are in love, is it so one-sided? Can you say that one is only an empty vessel being filled by the love of

another? Is God's love so one-directional? Isn't it possible that God sees something in us besides our sinfulness and neediness that connects to God's own heart?

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we throw away our Protestant conviction that salvation comes through grace alone and not by our works, not by our righteousness. Rather, I want to suggest simply that righteousness is still endearing to the Lord.

I am reminded of the time when the Rich Young Ruler approached Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, to which the young man replies, "Teacher, all these things I have kept since I was a boy." And then the text says "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

This seems a curious response. After all, Jesus would send him on his way, telling him that he was still lacking. But the man's righteousness was still endearing to our Lord. And so I wonder if it is not the same with Mary.

Certainly Mary was human. She is not divine. She is not immaculate. And yet she was righteous. *There was something about Mary.*

I think that we can see at least three distinguishing characteristics in Mary. She was righteous, she was obedient, and she was sacrificial.

We at times believe that in ages past people were more pure, that couples saved themselves for marriage more often and that only recently has promiscuity increased. Though there arguably have been periods of greater morality, over the scope of the centuries we find that people have been human; they have been sinners in all the same ways as they are today.

And yet Mary, like faithful women and men today, was rare in her willingness to remain chaste. The Bible underscores Mary's purity. And I think that our understanding of the miracle of a sinless God being born to sinful humanity hinges upon the notion that Mary was indeed the Virgin Mary.

But beyond her purity, we can see in Scripture her understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary seemed to be well-versed in Messianic hope. When she does express her feelings in the passage to follow, she cites I Samuel, Psalms, Isaiah, Micah, and Exodus. She concludes, "As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever." It seems that if you saturate your mind with Scripture, then your reactions to crises and transitions in life can be handled with wisdom and with righteousness.

So while Mary was righteous, we can also note that she was obedient. Obedience and righteousness, of course, go hand in hand. But when we see Gabriel pronouncing the Lord's intentions, Mary simply responds "May it be to me according to God's word."

Certainly Mary could have objected to this proposal – and we would understand her human response if she had done so. "I am unworthy," she might say. "I cannot be fit to

be the mother of the Lord and raise him in such a lowly estate.” “You should look elsewhere, Gabriel. Please have me excused.”

But Mary doesn't do that. Instead she replies, “I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

And to be the mother of Jesus was not just to birth him. It was to care for him, protect him, nurture him, to watch him grow in wisdom, in stature and in favor with God and humanity. And in the end, Mary's destiny was to sacrifice for him. Mary was sacrificial.

She sacrificed her reputation in birthing him, her residence and stability in life in her traversing with Joseph to Egypt in hiding, in returning to Nazareth, and in following her Son for the next thirty-three years.

And she followed him even in his long parade out of the city gates of Jerusalem. She heard the crowds jeer him and call for his crucifixion.

I don't know how many of you might have seen Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. It is a movie that is difficult to watch, to consider the suffering of our Lord. I was holding up rather well through the movie until they had us view Jesus through Mary's eyes. And as Jesus stumbled and fell carrying his cross, they made a flashback of Mary viewing Jesus falling down as a little child and her motherly compulsion to sweep him up again in her arms, a compulsion that undoubtedly never really diminishes no matter how old your child.

So, imagine that kind of suffering happening to your own child – and all you can do is watch. She was there watching him until he hung limply on the cross, dying a slow death, and knowing all along how unjustified this action was, how innocent was the man, was the boy, was that infant whom she held years ago in a stable in Bethlehem.

Though we should never deny or diminish the sacrifice made by Christ and by God the Father through all this, we also need to see the sacrifice made by Mary.

Certainly *there's something about Mary*. But then again, anything we see of Mary's qualities we must see originating from a God who used someone so ordinary, from a God who sends his Son to be among the ordinary.

As Alan Richardson has observed, *Mary's humble acceptance of the divine will is the starting point of the story of the redemption of the human race from sin*.

And so Mary's story might become ours. We, too, are participants as we accept Christ Jesus and allow him to dwell in us. And that something about Mary can be something about all of us – as we witness the child of God who is with us. As we live humble, quite ordinary existences sharing life with common humanity, we too can become participants in the grace and glory of the Lord's greatness. As we hold Christ not simply in our hearts but boldly share Christ with the world, we take steps toward the righteous example given to us.

Surely, *there is something about Mary*. May there be something about us, too. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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