

Sermon, December 13, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome Betty Mattingly, who, with her daughter Mary Reisinger, will provide special music for worship on a couple of different instruments. The songs were recorded at home. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. Pandemic cases, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. But there is some promising news these days.

When we shut down public worship last March, we all hoped it would be for only a few weeks. As the virus spread, it became obvious it could be a matter of months, and some warned it could be years before it would be safe to gather indoors again. Today it may well again be only a matter of weeks, as mass vaccinations are expected to begin soon. We have been through many difficult months now. We can handle a few more weeks. But in the mean time we must be vigilant about wearing masks in public, hand washing, maintaining social distancing and avoiding indoor gatherings until we are protected. So let's be safe. And cautious. And finally, let us be hopeful again.

Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com. You can also donate through our Facebook page. The Christmas Youth Pageant will be part of next Sunday's service. Christmas Eve Candlelight service and our half hour prelude of sacred music will be available on or before Christmas Eve. Watch for the links, coming by email. Now today's stupid joke.

My friend says with Christmas fast approaching it's really hard to keep the kids under control. I told her, "You should do what my neighbor does. Every year he takes empty boxes, wraps them up real fancy and stacks them under the Christmas tree. Then any time the kids act up or

misbehave, he throws one of them into the fireplace.” My friend said, “Great idea! But what does he do when he runs out of kids?” (No, see, it’s the fake presents that go into the fire. Not the kids...)

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Lord, hear our prayers and come to us, bringing light into the darkness of our hearts. For you live and reign with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Luke the first chapter.

Mary said [to her relative Elizabeth], "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Here ends the reading.

A reading from the gospel of John, the first chapter.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Advent is the only season of year when the lectionary allows us to substitute a poem or song from Luke for the regular Old Testament Psalm. So as Christmas approaches, I got to read from both the first chapter of Luke AND the first chapter of John in the same sitting. I told you last week that John the Baptist is pretty much the main character in the assigned gospel readings on both the second and third Sundays of Advent. And last week I proceeded to tell you pretty much everything I know about the Baptist.

So today I get to talk instead about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. They are two of my favorite minor characters of the gospels.

According to Luke, Mary and Elizabeth were somehow related. Elizabeth is described as an older woman, while Mary was quite young, so many speculate she could have been Mary's great aunt or perhaps first cousin, once or twice removed. Both were pregnant when they met today. Miraculously so, thanks to direct divine intervention.

Mary's speech to her relative is actually in the form of verse, so most scholars agree this is actually a song or at least poem. Some call it the "Song of Mary," but it is more often called the "Magnificat" based on Mary's first words, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

It is one of four such liturgical songs that appear in Luke's gospel. Some credit Luke's author with writing them, but more and more scholars think these were songs already in existence that were sung in worship by the early church. Remember, Luke's gospel probably wasn't put to paper until a couple of generations after Jesus walked the earth.

I told you last week that John the Baptist is also mentioned in the Qu'ran, and is honored to this day by Muslims. His mother Elizabeth is as well. She is remembered as a wise, pious believer, who, like Mary, was exalted by God to a high station in life.

Mary, called Maryam in Arabic, is the only woman in Islam's holy book identified by name. She is mentioned seventy times there, more often than she is mentioned in the Bible. Mary is called the greatest of all women, specially chosen by God to be mother of Isa, or Jesus. And yes, Muslims, like many Christians, also consider her a perpetual virgin, believing Isa was conceived by the divine spirit.

The theological study of Mary is called Mariology. It has been around a long time. In fact, even the early church fathers described her as

everything from the Mother of God to the Queen of Heaven to the New Eve.

Mary has been a frequent topic of discussion in the more than fifty official Lutheran-Catholic dialogues that have taken place since Vatican Two. Thirty-some years ago a panel of Catholic and Protestant scholars got together to examine Mary's role in both the Bible and in the church since. They concluded that neither Catholic nor Protestant traditions have really done her justice.

They said Catholics have practically conceded full divinity to Mary, while Conservative Evangelicals have relegated her to not much more than a prop in their Christmas pageants. Mainline Protestants like us have assumed a middle position, between those extremes. But to be honest, most Mainline Protestants I know don't really talk much about Mary these days. Let's fix that.

Despite the preponderance of Marian legends and myths, neither the Bible nor any reliable non-biblical historical source knows much about her personal life. She was betrothed to Joseph, hailed from Nazareth and was somehow related to John the Baptist's mother, and that's pretty much it. She is called Maria in the original Greek of the New Testament. That is a Hellenized form of the name of Moses' sister: Miriam.

Miryam was a very common woman's name in first century Judea, possibly borne by up to one fourth of all good Jewish girls. The New Testament makes 56 mentions of Marys, which may refer to as many as seven different women, so at times it's difficult to keep all the Bible's Marys straight.

Mark mentions Jesus' mother by name only once. John never does. Matthew says a LITTLE about Mary, but not much, mostly because Matthew's Christmas story is more focused on Joseph.

Matthew and Luke agree Jesus was conceived by the VIRGIN Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit. But that detail isn't mentioned elsewhere in Bible.

Paul doesn't appear to have known anything about Jesus' mother, including her name or virginity. Paul wrote extensively about who Jesus is and what his coming means to us. But Paul either didn't know or didn't care much about who and where he came from.

While not based on things biblical, Catholic Church devotion to and veneration of Mary have grown almost exponentially since the second century, and are still growing here in the 21st. Marian Movements and Societies have sprung up everywhere, from the Sodality of Our Lady in sixteenth century Rome to the twenty-year -old America Needs Fatima activist group. For those more militant in their Marian devotion, there is the Legion of Mary, the Militia Immaculata, and the Blue Army of our Lady of Fatima.

The Kentucky-based Our Lady's Rosary Makers now number more than seventeen thousand volunteers. Every year they handcraft about seven million cord and chain rosaries that are distributed to Catholic missions all over the world.

For the record: The Catholic Church professes four primary doctrines concerning Mary. One: Her perpetual virginity. Two: That she is rightly called the "Mother of God." Three: Her Own immaculate conception. That one is often misunderstood by Protestants. It does NOT mean Mary was also born of a virgin, but that she was uniquely born free of original sin.

Number Four: At the end of her life Mary was assumed directly into heaven, with body and soul intact. Whether or not she actually died first, like other human beings, isn't specified.

Evangelicals don't, as a rule, believe any of those. What Lutherans say depends upon who you happen to be talking to. Because while nobody

in history was more critical of non-biblical Church mythology and overboard devotion to saints than Martin Luther, Luther himself firmly believed - One: Mary probably DID retain her virginity throughout her life. Two: Mary indeed deserves the title “mother of God.” (Even John Calvin thought so.)

As for Three: —the immaculate conception—first, keep in mind that it wasn’t until 1854 that Pope Pius IX officially articulated the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. And there are two funny things about that event. First of all, it was the papacy’s first decree based on a doctrine of Papal Infallibility--one that didn’t yet exist.

In fact, Papal Infallibility wouldn’t be declared until sixteen years later. The second funny thing about the Immaculate Conception is that even though it is generally scoffed at by today’s Protestants, Martin Luther himself declared it three centuries before Pius did.

As for number Four: the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven is the newest of the four Marian doctrines. It wasn’t officially declared until 1950 by Pius XII, although similar notions had floated around the church since the sixth century. Luther said about it, “we’re human beings. We couldn’t possibly know that.”

But did you know that Luther included the Ave Maria, or Hail Mary in his Personal Prayer Book of 1522? Although Luther didn’t call the Ave Maria a prayer. He said the Hail Mary is a faithful exercise in praise, not prayer. Luther said it praises God for creating the beloved and blessed person who was Mary.

He said it’s really just a matter of thanking God for her, the same way one might thank God for a beautiful sunrise, the warmth of spring or a gentle summer rain.

Luther encouraged all Protestants to say the Hail Mary regularly, although he said evil people shouldn't say it. And I bet you can guess who Luther meant by evil people: the Pope, the Dominicans and most of the Catholic Church hierarchy of his day. So to Luther, the Hail Mary is actually a better fit here at St. Mark's, than it would be over at St. Peter's.

Insiders say a fifth Marian Doctrine is close to becoming part of Catholic theology. That would be a declaration that Mary is co-redemptrix, and mediatrix of all graces, meaning essentially that SHE plays an active role in human redemption. Millions have signed petitions requesting a formal Vatican declaration to that effect. Signatories to date include Mother Theresa, forty-one cardinals and more than 500 bishops.

I'm pretty sure Luther wouldn't have gone along with that. Because despite his own devotion to Mary, Luther knew the more the church elevates Mary, the more it diminishes Jesus. And since one of the dogmas of our faith is that Jesus is both fully divine AND fully human, it's only logical that the more divine we make Mary out to be, the less human Jesus becomes.

And that is a troubling notion to me. Because I admit I still count on the human side of Jesus. The one who has been here and done that and understands how difficult it is for us to walk in his shoes, because he actually went to the trouble of coming here to walk in ours.

I think it's that human side of Jesus who best explains how God would rather forgive than condemn sinners. And who knows exactly what it is like when we struggle.

When we are hurting and frightened or lonely or sad or sick. We can certainly relate to that human Jesus who agonized at Gethsemane. And shed a tear or two over the death of his friend Lazarus.

The Jesus who actually thirsted and got hungry. No wonder he fed the multitudes, and then asked us to take care of those who hunger and thirst too--like maybe helping the 20 percent of American children who will go to bed hungry tonight. And do something for the millions in the developing world who lack access to safe drinking water.

I suspect it's also that human side of Jesus that abhorred violence so much that he commanded us to get along with our neighbors. And even pray for our enemies, knowing that if we do so we just might end up with fewer of them.

It makes sense to me that for Jesus to be fully human, Mary had to be fully human also. And that's fine, because I don't think we NEED another redeemer anyway. The one we have is doing just fine.

So I'll stick with Luther and not pray TO Mary. But I certainly will thank God for creating her. Along with those beautiful sunrises, the warmth of spring and gentle summer rains.

Amen.
