

Mary, Mother of Our Lord

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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August 15, 2010

Luke 1:46-55

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our denomination, the ELCA, has more than 550 congregations named for St. Paul. We have well over 700 congregations named Trinity or Holy Trinity. And St. John? More than 600 congregations named for him. So how many congregations do we have named for St. Mary, the mother of Jesus? What would you guess? Four hundred? One hundred? The answer is four. We have four congregations named for Mary, the Mother of Our Lord.

In our never-ending campaign to make sure that we do not appear to be too Roman Catholic, we Lutherans have pretty much slighted Mary. Which is our loss. This tenacious woman who outlasted her husband, and went on beyond the resurrection of her son to be a member of the Jerusalem church, the first Christian community. There is an interesting line that we read in Luke on Christmas Eve. When the shepherds reach the stable, and the manger, and they speak of angels. The Christmas story says, "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." And then, when Jesus is twelve, Luke tells a memorable story of how Jesus became separated from his parents in Jerusalem. Because he was debating and discussing with the teachers in the temple. And at the conclusion of that story, Luke says it again: Mary "treasured all these things in her heart."

And most scholars believe that Luke is indicating that Mary herself brought these stories of Jesus into the later church. These things that happened when Jesus was a child were remembered after his death and resurrection. They made sense, in hindsight, once the story was complete. So this Christmas, remember that not only did Mary bring the child into the world, she likely also brought the story of Christmas into the church. The ELCA has 25 congregations named Nativity, and 30 congregations named Epiphany. That we know anything about the Nativity and the Epiphany at all is probably due to the woman whom we have named four congregations after.

Today's gospel is simply Mary's song, or her poem, or her story. Due to its detour through Latin in coming to us, we commonly call it the Magnificat. A particular line in the poem says "My soul *magnifies* the Lord." It's that word *magnify* which becomes *Magnificat* in Latin. I am fascinated by this line. *My soul magnifies the Lord*. Because God cannot be increased, can he? The God of Plato and the Greeks could not be "magnified." That would be impossible. Here, Mary is physically swelling up with pregnancy. And she seems to be saying that her soul is swelling up with God. God is getting bigger in her. Is that theologically possible? She's not interested in theology. She is telling her story.

Mary's song is decidedly Old Testament. It has more in common with Jeremiah than with Jesus. It is about a God who judges and sets things right. There is not grace, or forgiveness, or atonement here. Just a powerful, righteous God with a sense of poetic justice. Mary modeled her song on Hannah's song. Hannah makes her song when she miraculously gives birth to Samuel described in the biblical book of First Samuel.¹ Mary knew her Bible stories. And when she was blessed with a miraculous birth, she connected herself to Hannah's miraculous birth. We do not know if there is any truth to the legend that Mary's mother was named Hannah, or as we say in our language, Anne. But the fact that Mary's song is based on Anne's song either supports or explains the notion that Mary's mother was a woman named Anne. In that case, the original Hannah's song might very well have been a part of Mary's own upbringing.

Traditionally, Mary is honored for her obedience to the Lord. The moment when she says to God's angel Gabriel: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" In a particularly scary time, when she was particularly young, and particularly susceptible to public humiliation, Mary was brave and obedient. She is in that sense a saint, like Saint Paul or Saint Peter or Saint Francis of Assisi. Someone we can admire for their example. (Although technically, we are all saints.)

However, instead of Mary's obedience to God, I would like to make the argument that Mary should be honored for her story-telling. The task indicated by Luke: *But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* Memory. Reflection. Story. Without Mary's story, we have no Christmas, no knowledge of how God became human. Memory. Reflection. Story. Mary links her own story to the old, scriptural story of Hannah. This helps her to interpret and understand what is happening. Mary's personal story overlaps with God's story from the Old Testament. And for us, Mary's personal story has now become God's story from the New Testament.

A few weeks ago, I made a distinction in one of my sermons between *evangelism* and *witness*. The church does evangelism. And preachers do evangelism. We are proclaiming the truth and the good news of Jesus. We therefore have to get it right. Pastors have to be trained in theology. Churches have constitutions, doctrines, and mission statements. The official, evangelical message of our church is "*Justification by grace, through faith, apart from works, for the sake of Christ.*" Evangelism is the official message. It may be kind of dry. Every Sunday I begin my sermon with, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" That's the official message. The words which follow may not meet the standard. But if my sermon is weak or wrong, at least I've stated the message loud and clear. Evangelism.

Witness is your personal story. Or my personal story. Or Mary's personal story. It may not be theologically correct. Mary did not have the benefit of a seminary education. Like the disciples, Mary did not fully understand Jesus when he was sitting right there with her. Her witness, however—

¹1Samuel 2:1-10.

even though she did not understand it herself– her witness was crucial to Christianity.²

One of the ways that the new work of this congregation differs from the old work of this congregation is witness. In the 1980's, when our community needed family programs, Dove of Peace provided family programs. In the 21st century, families are different. Priorities are different. And folks in our community don't need to be more busy. Very few people in the 21st century in this part of Tucson are going to turn to a Christian church because they are bored and don't have anything else to do. People are going to turn to a Christian community– if they can trust us– they are going to seek out purpose for their lives. They are going to seek consolation and hope for their hurting. They may seek some kind of authentic community over and against this crass commercial and politicized culture that affects us all, especially the young.

This means that we have to brush up on our story-telling. We have to get a little more comfortable with witness. That's the way Dove of Peace will change the world.³ Once, it was programs and activities. Today, it's just as likely to be conversation or group discussion. Purpose, not programs. Relationships, not meetings. Hope, not hype. The new work of Dove of Peace is going to need us members to tell our personal stories. And just as important, to hear the personal stories of others. The new work will be coming out of our Vision Team in a few weeks, around the time that we get our first breath of cool air.

In the meantime, ponder these things in your heart. Which Bible stories fit your own experience? Which ones don't? If you had to point out one thing that God has done in your life in the last year, what would it be? That one thing that God has done, have you shared it with anyone? Have you wondered aloud whether it was really a sighting of God, or just a figment of your imagination? Your stories, and the stories of the person sitting next to you, may contain the key to magnifying God's presence for all of us, and for the newcomers we have yet to meet. Amen.

²“These are puzzling events that Mary must keep in her heart. She will interpret them correctly after the ministry when Jesus has been enthroned in heaven. Then, as part of the community that was gathered to receive the gift of Jesus' Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14), she will hear the glorified Jesus proclaimed as “Lord, Messiah, Savior” (Acts 2:36; 5:31) and will come to know fully what the angel meant when he told the shepherds: “To you this day there is born in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah and Lord.” (Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, Anchor: 1993, pp. 430-431.)

³“Evangelicals have been criticized– many times rightly so– for being dogmatic and closed-minded. For too long we have been doing all the talking, without any dialogue. We are now serving new generations that have serious trust issues, and trust is not earned by talking just one-way. We must disarm this criticism and regain trust. We need to encourage, not discourage, people to think, to question, to discover. Why are we so afraid of encouraging people to think for themselves? We may need to set up open forums at which people can engage in deeper dialogue about the message.” (Dan Kimball, The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for All Generations, Zondervan: 2003, pp. 192-193.)