

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

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Feast of St. Mary: Isaiah 61:10-11; Psalm 34:1-9; Luke 1:46-55

There's something about Mary. Today we are celebrating the feast of Mary, mother of Jesus. The most highly favored lady. Subject of some of the greatest artwork of all time. Second only to her son, in many people's minds, for her holiness. The Virgin, the Queen of Heaven, the mother of sorrows, *theotokos* or God-bearer to the Greeks, Notre Dame to the French. Blessed is she among women. There's something about Mary. Many of you know this from having had an entire adult education series on Mary a couple years ago.

There's a lot we know about Mary from the Bible, but not quite enough, it would seem, to satisfy the fascination many Christians have had with her. Not content with the scriptural accounts alone, people have gone outside the bounds of the received tradition to create stories around her childhood, her adult life, and even her death. Some of these non-scriptural stories have even made it into the Church's teachings, even though they appear nowhere in our Bible. For those of you who have experience in the Roman Catholic Church or the Eastern Orthodox churches, you will know that her feast day (which those traditions also celebrate tomorrow), commemorates Mary's death, calling it either The Assumption or the Dormition (falling asleep) of the *Theotokos*. The story goes that instead of dying, Mary ascended bodily into Heaven which has granted Mary a divine status in many people's minds. Yet the Bible says nothing about her death, let alone her Assumption into Heaven.

Frankly, I'm less interested in celebrating what we don't know about Mary than I am in celebrating her for what we do. Because I think that what we do have in the Gospels gives us more than enough reason to single her out for special praise and devotion.

Here's what we do know about Mary. First of all, we have the story of the Annunciation where she is told she will bear a son, and not just a son, but the Son of God. Mary's faithfulness and devotion to God is rewarded in ways she did not expect. Then we have the nativity stories which appear in Matthew and Luke. These we know well from Christmastime. She gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, she raised him up, had to protect him. In Luke we also get a short glimpse of Jesus' childhood when he escapes his parents watch to remain in the Temple in Jerusalem, causing his mother all sorts of worry and concern. She appears at other points in Jesus' adult ministry too. She brings his brothers and sisters to see him. She tags along with the other women who followed him as he went around teaching. And John cites her as being the catalyst for Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. Of course, most tragically, she is recounted as being at the foot of the Cross, watching her son die a torturous death. And then she is also present with the shell-shocked disciples as they gather in the upper room after his death awaiting the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

So it is not extra-Biblical to say that Mary was not only a devout woman in her own regard, but she was also a strong woman and a caring mother. She suffered the indignity of an out of wed-lock birth, she knew the Son of God with a physical level of intimacy that no one else on earth could even begin to imagine; she raised him and an extended family and then followed supported and believed in him even if that meant watching him die. There was no body who knew Jesus better than her.

So all that makes Mary, I hope you will agree, worthy of our adoration and praise. But what does she have to teach us? How does Mary's example impact our Christian lives?

Well one of the most important things Mary teaches us can be found in the *Magnificat*, the song she sings to her cousin Elizabeth in exultation at her pregnancy and experience of God's favor. It was our Gospel reading today:

*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.*

As you'll notice this passage, like the famous Beatitudes, is full of reversals of fortune; an upending of the status quo, particularly around the humbling of the rich and haughty and a lifting up of the poor and lowly. This is the glorious hope of the Christian Gospel and it is the heart of Mary's song of praise. She was lowly. She was of no repute, and yet because she was faithful, God chose her to bear his son, making her blessed.

The Christian message of lifting up the lowly has often been particularly powerful for people whom society has cast to its margins. Here in America that has historically (and presently) been people of color, women, the poorly educated, the poor, the addicted, the disabled, members of the LGBTQ community, and others. For them lowliness has been imposed from the outside which makes those types of people feel that they are somehow less important, less valuable, less human than others. It is one of our most egregious societal sins.

And yet what we often see within those groups of people who have had their lowliness imposed upon them is that they are the ones who know God most closely, believe most sincerely, who honor most fully and praise most heartily. It is those to whom God has promised to turn their misfortune into blessing that know the meaning of Christian hope. God finds a space and a place in the hearts of the lowly because those whom the world has trodden down know that we must look beyond this world for our salvation.

All of which puts us in a pretty tricky spot, wouldn't you say? As I in the mirror, and look around, I see more of the rich and powerful than I do the poor and lowly. The outside world is not going to impose lowliness on many of us. This may make things more comfortable, but it also makes things more difficult when it comes to Christian faith. For the whole of Christian faith is predicated on one's acquaintance with weakness; of one's awareness that they even need a savior to begin with. If we, as the affably affluent, cannot get in touch with our vulnerability, with our weakness, with our need for God, then the Christian message of lifting up the lowly will not sink in. And since the outside world is not going to impose it on us, we've got to discover it within ourselves.

The problem is that nowhere else in our world is lowliness considered a particularly desirable trait. Weakness, need, imperfection, vulnerability, all of these things we are taught to plaster over so as to present ourselves happy and perfect to the outside world. And since I speak of what I know, I would say this is all especially true for men, especially well-off, high-level professional straight white men.

And what happens when we plaster over our lowliness is that pretty soon we bury our vulnerability so far down we start to forget we have it or how to access it. We start to forget our need. Because we can, all things considered, continue on without much need for God. We can have the life we are told will make us happy: smiling family, big house, yard, plenty of food on the table, safety, security and we need not get on our knees once. We can do that all on our own strength, and plenty of people do.

But then—and I've seen this time and time again—something comes to shatter this illusion: an illness, a tragedy, an addiction. And we find ourselves completely unprepared for how to deal with the fact that no, we don't have everything under control. No, the universe does not bend to our will. No, in fact you will not be able to manage by your strength alone. And no, you are not perfect.

This is why Mary is so important. As one who is acquainted with her lowliness, her weakness, her poverty, she knows she needs to rely on God. That is where her hope lies. Same is true for a variety of groups in our world, who have had lowliness imposed upon them. One cannot know God, unless one knows they need God. And for most of us, this means we've got to do some real, honest, difficult work in discovering in ourselves the places we are lowly, where we are poor, where we are weak. We've got to find those broken bits of us and bring them before God. Because when God turns the world upside down, we want to come out on the right side. So spend some time getting acquainted with the ways you are not perfect, confront the fact that you are not spiritually self-sufficient and know that you need God's favor and forgiveness as much as anyone. This may sound a little harsh, but it's said completely out of love. Because if we can't find a way to say, with Mary, that God has looked with favor upon our lowliness, we will not get it. There will be nothing for God to lift us up from. But if you *can* be one who is aware of your weakness; if you *can* understand yourself to be in need of God; if you *can* know your places of lowliness, then Mary's words can be your words, and Mary's honor, your honor. Then your soul can magnify the Lord, and your spirit rejoice in God, your savior. For God will do great things for you, if you let Him.