

-During this Christmas season, there must be a resurgence of bible documentaries and movies going on because I ran across a movie ad poster for the mini-series from the History Channel "The Bible". It made me chuckle. It's so typical: you got your perfectly manicured Jesus in a pure white cotton robe with a scruffy "Joseph" over one shoulder with an even smaller Mary in the background making a facial expression somewhere in between concerned and fearful. Though in many ways I think this poster is ridiculous, I think it does portray one thing correctly: how our society treats Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary always seems to be a little bit in the background. Infact, many paintings and renditions of the nativity scene focus on Joseph even more than they do Mary! Joseph, who in the Gospel of Luke has 0 speaking lines. That's right, he doesn't say ANYTHING in this Gospel (Joseph's only speaking part is in the Gospel of Matthew who depicts the angel Gabriel appearing to him as well). Yet it is Joseph who gets painted as the strong, courageous person many times leaving Mary as this "little girl holding the baby".

-Then, you get the whole church's debate on the virginity of Mary and the whole character of Mary gets warped even further. She becomes this great "science experiment" in which the church calls her body "blameless and perfect-clean of all sin". The 17th century Catholic saint: Saint Louis Marie de Montfort wraps this whole treatment up of Mary quite succinctly by writing: "The Son of God became man for our salvation but only in Mary and through Mary". Sometimes, in the way especially the church of the Middle Ages speaks and debates about Mary, I wonder whether we should just talk of Mary as some "holy oven", whose purpose is solely just to cook up this heavenly Savior and pop it out for the world.

-The church is very guilty, not only with Mary but with many other female figures in the bible, of dumbing down, characterizing falsely, or simply forgetting about their humanness and role in God's work in the world. Moses' sister Miriam is forgotten about even though she was most likely pivotal in leading the people of Israel through the desert, Ruth was a foreign-born temptress, the Samaritan woman must have been a prostitute because she slept around with 6 different husbands, Mary Magdalene tempted Jesus through seduction, and Mary the Mother of God was an "empty vessel" just waiting to be used by God for childbirth. All of these things have been said multiple times by highly regarded saints, pastors, priests, and theologians of the church. It's downright despicable and disgusting.

-Many of you know I love Christmas carols and songs (we are going to be singing some this afternoon at our open-house, so get ready!) But there are some I don't like and find down right inaccurate. One common Christmas song that is quite popular these days is titled "Mary Did You Know?" (in fact the popular acapella group Pentatonix just did a

new music video rendition of this song). I will come out and say it to you now (no offense to any of you who hold it dear), but I hate this song. Here's why:

-One of the verses goes: "Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man? Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God." So here's the thing, whoever wrote this song obviously didn't read the Gospel of Luke because as we can see today: YES, Mary did know!! This is what the whole Magnificat is about!! "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."

-The Magnificat, one of the most popular pieces of the entire New Testament and an anthem for the season of Advent. These are *Mary's words*. Mary, the mother of Jesus and prophet in her own right. Mary, courageous young woman who helped declare that God isn't finished doing new things in this broken world. Mary, who probably couldn't even read or write, is the *first* person live out (John the Baptist was preaching about it, Mary was living it out) this new age of Jesus Christ coming into the world.

-Mary wasn't just a vehicle for the "light" to be brought somewhere, Mary was the light. And in being the light, showed more perseverance, courage, power, and grace than many of her male prophet counterparts.

-So today is not just "Mary Sunday" as sometimes the church likes to call it (oh, how nice). Today, in my book, is "Take Back Mary Sunday" when we say: no more are the days when Mary is just known for her body and no more are the days when the church can cast her aside as a means to an end. Instead, this day is about placing Mary back in her rightful place of prophet and doer of God's love ("My soul magnifies the Lord").

-But, in saying all of this, what does re-claiming of Mary actually mean for us and our lives now?

-I realize, this answer can't come entirely from me as a middle-class, white male. It's the male dominated theological structures of the church that got us into forgetting about major pieces of Mary and I need to own that. But with that being stated first, here's a beginning of an answer to this question.

-Re-claiming Mary is about teaching our young girls and women that they matter and that their leadership is welcome and needed by the church. And I'm not talking just teaching Sunday School (though that is important too). We need female preachers, teachers, and prophets. We need women to masterfully declare: "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." This is the radical and uncomfortable message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which needs to be told by more people than just men.

-But notice one thing that Mary doesn't talk about in her words of the Magnificat. She doesn't really talk about giving birth! Here we put SO much emphasis on her expression of faith in relation to birth, yet it's not really the focal point of her words. Instead, her words point to someone who radically lives by faith: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."

-Re-claiming Mary, then, maybe is a calling for us to "bambelela: never give up" (as our choir sang just a few minutes ago) and not to "sell God out" too soon. For as the Angel Gabriel tells Mary: "nothing is impossible for God". NOTHING is impossible with God. Mary is living proof of this.

-Finally, re-claiming Mary is about lifting up the poor and outcast. This is what she lived and preached, even when Christ was dying on the cross. "He has lifted up the lowly." Just the other day, we got a visit from a gentleman who lives in Bonner who asked if he could get some bed sheets and blankets for his family. "I have been out of work for a while due to injury and need some help keeping my family warm," he said. Several members of our congregation have responded not just giving this man what he asked for, but lifting him and his family up in word and prayer. "Thank you for the leg up", he later said to me. "I couldn't go on in many ways without people like you."

- "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." Thank you Mary for these radical and prophetic words. May our church be able to break free of it's "patriarchal hold" of this powerful prophet of God and follower of Christ and reclaim Mary for who she really is. Amen.