

-Happy Mary Sunday! Every year no matter what “lectionary cycle” (if you don’t know what the lectionary is, ask me later or come to bible study!) our church is going through, there is always a Sunday in Advent that focuses on Mary. For good reason, Mary is vital to the Christmas story and inspires the church in many ways.

-But for us protestants, perhaps, focusing on Mary the mother of Jesus can be a little uncomfortable. I remember I had someone come up to me at my internship congregation in San Francisco one time in bible study and ask: why are we spending so much time talking about Mary? Shouldn’t we talk about Jesus? Focusing on Mary is what Catholics do.

-It’s true, our Catholic brothers and sisters do spend more time lifting up Mary, perhaps most famously in the Rosary prayer: “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” Well, it is true that the Lutheran and Catholic churches have different theologies when it comes to Mary. We Lutherans don’t stress very much the immaculate conception or blameless nature of Mary so she would be able to birth a blameless child in Jesus. We don’t really stress much the virginity of Mary, even, as much as Catholics do. And if you ask me, with great respect to the Roman Catholic tradition and our friends at St. Ann’s, I’m glad Lutherans don’t stress these things as much personally. I’ll be honest.

-But here’s the thing, I think Sundays such as this one that have more of a focus on Mary have too often turned into opportunities to bash Roman Catholics and not enough of respecting Mary as a crucial part of the overall Christian tradition. Yes, maybe we disagree with Catholics on some things in how they regard Mary, but let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater! Infact, let me clear, I think our Roman Catholic friends are onto something that maybe we in the Protestant tradition have lost.

-So in good faith, I’m going to lead the charge and campaign this morning for Lutherans. This is going to be our “Re-claiming of Mary” Sunday. Who’s with me??

-What does Mary show us about faith that we need to re-claim?

-Let me address, first, the elephant in the room whenever we talk about Mary and that is: sex. The church throughout almost its entire history seems to always get infatuated with Mary and sex. Maybe it’s the fact that we picture her as this young, beautiful girl or the romantic scenes of her and Joseph in the manger together, I don’t know. But we seem to again and again get side tracked on Mary and her sex or virginity. Let me just say, this young girl giving birth to this child of God is a miracle. But is this really *the* miracle that Luke underscores as Mary participating in. Is Mary’s only role as miracle child birther? NO. If that’s all we get, then I think we have completely misread this gospel and the story of Christmas.

-Mary’s role in this story is to show us how to be a disciple and how to radically rely on the divine, especially when we don’t know how it’s all going to turn out.

-I remember sitting as the hospital chaplain in on a doctor's consultation visit to a patient named Maggie in MN. She was in her late 70's and had recently had a heart attack. The doctor was going through describing the heart surgery they were going to be doing. It was a complicated surgery and a lot of things could go wrong. In the middle of the doctor's explanation, the patient closed her eyes for a long time. Finally, I had to ask her: "are you OK?" Maggie opened her eyes and said: "yeah, I'm OK. I'm just practicing leaning a little bit on God right now." And then she turned to the doctor: "So if you could finish up, I'd appreciate it. My leaning on God needs a little practice before the surgery." Flabbergasted, the doctor didn't know what to say and left the room. I'm happy to report Maggie did get through the surgery and recovered fully.

- "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." This is Mary leaning radically into God's promise. Let me also make a point here on Mary's choice of words: I don't see this as a "blind leaning". I don't see this as Mary saying: "Yeah, I'm the little faithful one and I'll do whatever you want." In fact, if you backup a few verses it says: "But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Actually, the translation of Mary as "perplexed" is a little lame: It actually means disturbed, stirred up, or greatly confused. Mary was actually like: "What the *bleep is going on here?"

-Mary, I think, is actually quite human here. She's fearful and distressed. She's uneasy. Yet she leans into God. So this verse isn't really a joyful one, but one of focus and commitment. OK, God, I'm going to lean into this crazy thing and you better come with me.

-Then Mary shows us another type of leaning when she goes and visits her relative, Elizabeth. Leaning on others. Notice that Mary was probably in need of some comfort and Elizabeth became her rock. Elizabeth says to Mary: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' Mary's response to this is incredible Magnificat, an incredible and radicle piece of language that expresses a deep and abounding joy.

-Leaning on God and community. The building blocks of faith. So simple, and yet so hard. This is when we witness that famous statement: "they showed their true colors." Mary shows her true colors in the midst of a chaotic, tumultuous, and scary time. It is Mary that is able to show a commitment and a trust that none of even Jesus' disciples could. It is a revelation of what faith in action, I believe, really means.

-Which gets me to another important point that I want to touch on briefly. You know, we live in a time of great transition ourselves, especially when it comes to women standing up for respect, dignity, and fair opportunities. The #metoo movement has swelled into

many aspects of our entertainment, politics, and workplaces. It has highlighted the damage that can be done when our culture sweeps sexual harassment and abuse under the rug. Perhaps this story sticks out a little more to me than, because of this recent movement as it shows some power dynamics between what has traditionally been thought of as a masculine God with a female character. It doesn't seem God is asking, but *telling* Mary here: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." What power does Mary have here? What if she had said no thanks! This is very uncomfortable in some ways because maybe for many of us, we might think: is this Mary's #metoo moment with God? Now, I also want to very clearly state here: I think it is dangerous to read our 21st century perspectives completely into a 1st century text. Luke, while writing this gospel, was not thinking about women speaking out on social media against their abusers. Period. So we can't either fully accuse nor fully exonerate this story.

-But here again is where the importance lies of Mary radically modeling for us a leaning into her faith and a revealing of God's nature to us. This revealing of God's nature continues throughout many, many stories of both Old and New Testaments. In this context, then, is it really the God that Mary knows and the God that we know who would just see Mary as a way to end? Is it the God that is revealed in these texts who's nature would be to just "use Mary" as a vessel for birthing Jesus and that's it? No, that's not God that I know and that's not the God that this church professes faith in. Nor do I believe it is the God that Mary places such trust and devotion in.

-As our Psalm for today, Psalm 89, says: "I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."

-I want to re-claim Mary this Sunday because she inspires and connects me to a God who is faithful to ALL people, not just some. May that Mary, the one that leans radically into God bring you courage and hope as you too may struggle to lean forward in these uncertain times. Amen.