

Honoring Mary

Recently, conversations about Mary, the mother of Jesus, popped up in both my OMHART reading circle and in Tom Schmidt's poetry workshop, the poems from which are now displayed in the Parish House. I encourage you to check them out! In both conversations, we asked what we really know about Mary and discussed whether she has meaning for our lives today. This inspired me to dust off and update a sermon I preached here, six years ago, which looks at some possible ways of understanding who Mary was and how she might still have relevance, especially for women in today's political climate.

The Advent and Christmas season is pretty much the only time we hear about Mary, when we honor her for giving birth to Jesus. But what do we know about the biblical Mary? Not much, really. Scholars agree that she was probably quite young, no more than fourteen years old, since 12-14 was the normal age for women to marry and begin childbearing, in the Ancient Near East. After her leading role in the birth narratives, Mary appears only a few times in the gospel stories of the adult Jesus. The gospels differ on whether Mary was supportive of his ministry, and indeed could be numbered among his followers, or whether she was among those, as Mark's gospel claims, who saw Jesus as deranged or possessed by demons. Whatever she thought and felt about his ministry, she *is* named as one of the women who stayed by him when he was crucified, a horrific experience for a mother.

Matthew's and Luke's gospels are the only ones that contain birth narratives, and, in both, Mary's virginity is either stated or implied. I know that the idea of virgin birth has been, for many, a very large speed bump on the road of faith. Matthew was at pains to show his Jewish Christian audience that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. And so he quotes Isaiah— *the virgin shall conceive and bear a son*— in his birth narrative. Some scholars have pointed out that the original Hebrew text referred only to a "young woman"— *the young woman shall conceive and bear a son*. But when the text was translated into Greek, the word used for "young woman" was one that primarily meant "virgin." Thus Mary's virginity could have been a translation error.

However, for Luke's largely gentile audience, Mary's virginity would not have been a stumbling block. This is because it was quite commonly claimed that Greek and Roman rulers and heroes were divinely conceived, the products of couplings between male gods and human women. Alexander the Great was purported to be the issue of one such divine/earthly union. I remember my theology professor saying that the people of that time had no problem with the idea of divine paternity and virgin birth. The problem was claiming such a paternity and birth for *Jesus*, who was not a great ruler or a conquerer but a Jewish peasant who died a shameful death. So the insistence on Mary's virginity could have been part of the effort to bolster the claim that Jesus was the Messiah by giving him the same paternity as other great men of the time.

But there was a reason why virginity *itself* was important to the early church, an importance that may have contributed to the the emphasis on Mary's virginity. According to theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, in their book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, about a decade before the birth of Jesus, Rome enacted laws that imposed severe tax penalties on those who refused to marry and bear children. With an infant mortality rate of 60% and a life expectancy of 25, Rome needed women to marry young, and bear at least five children, to replace its population, a replacement necessary to maintain both its tax base and a steady supply of young men to serve in its armies. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has historical precedent in Rome's need for women to be primarily baby-makers, and there seem to be many in our country today who would like to see women— particularly white women— confined to this role, out of fear that we are approaching the point where white people will be in the minority.

The Early Church resisted Rome's conscription and overtaxation. And so, according to Brock and Parker, "asceticism and virginity [for both men and women] emerged as ways to defy imperial pressures to marry and reproduce." For women, virginity and refusal to marry also became a way to reject women's subordination to men, a rejection supported by many in the Early Church, which, at first, practiced a remarkable equality in its gender relationships. One of the first heroes and martyrs of the church was a woman named Thecla, who, after hearing Paul preach on virginity, rejected the husband chosen for her by her wealthy family. Thecla went on to become a famous itinerant preacher. Her example inspired a whole movement of women who became church leaders or pilgrims themselves, refusing marriage and retaining their virginity, the only sure form of birth control available to them. According to her *Catholic Online* biography, "Thecla gained a massive "cult-like" following, and became perhaps the most prominent figure for female empowerment at the time."

And so if we think of what virginity meant at the time the gospels were written, the emphasis on Mary's virginity takes on a very different meaning. This is not the virginity lifted up by the church, in later centuries, as the ideal state for "good" girls and young women. In fact, this is a virginity so *bad* that Thecla was condemned to death for it— *twice*. This is a virginity of empowerment and protest against oppression, the same empowerment and protest we hear in Mary's song, the Magnificat. As Brock and Parker note, "Mary magnified God by proclaiming a revolution of justice": *He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servants . . . 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.*

So what happened to the Mary of empowerment and protest? Devotion to Mary was an important part of Christianity for centuries, following the ascendancy of the church, in the fourth century, C.E. and continues to be important to many Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians today. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, it absorbed beliefs and practices from native peoples who were willingly or forcibly converted. Some scholars see in Marian prayers, songs, and practices,

goddess worship that went underground and emerged as devotion to Mary. Certainly, Mary, as the Queen of Heaven, provided a much-needed feminine presence in what had become a heavily patriarchal religion, a religion that had abandoned the boundary-crossing gender equality of its early days.

This feminine presence was lost to Protestants, during the Reformation, when Mary was demoted from her lofty throne to become simply the mother of Jesus, and nothing more. If any of you grew up Catholic, you might not think this is such a bad thing. Because, over time, the feminine characteristics assigned to Mary, by the church fathers, began to look more and more like acquiescence to patriarchal domination. Mary was obedient, a willing handmaiden to her Lord. Mary was the eternal virgin, who, unlike the goddess, became equated with a complete lack of, or even rejection of, sexuality. In *A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality*, Patricia Lynn Reilly shares one woman's reflection on the view of Mary promoted by her religious upbringing: "*Mary was a nonperson with no anger and no spine. She was the only female I saw in church, and she was only half human, reduced as she was to only good qualities.*"

The Mary offered for devotion, by the church, was honored because she was a mother, and motherhood was considered the highest estate available to women. She was portrayed as gentle and obedient, nurturing and kind, virginal and chaste, bearing only those feminine qualities that a male-dominated religion labeled good. She was a far cry from the young woman whose response to the news that she would bear the Messiah, her people's earthly savior, was the revolutionary, justice proclaiming Magnificat.

My own mother was fairly short. She never quite made it to five feet, and, in her nineties, she came in at about four-eight. In her late eighties, she bought herself a sweatshirt with a quote from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, that proclaims, *and though she is but little, she is fierce*. And that is a quality of Mary, and of women, that I would like us to consider this morning. Women have been on the down-side of deeply-ingrained systemic oppression, both political and personal, for just about as long as recorded history, and probably before, all around the world. And throughout history, and around the world, women, though we may be but little, have been fierce.

We have had to be. Like Mary, we have had to be fierce on behalf of our children. Like Thecla, we have had to be fierce on behalf of ourselves, and of women and girls everywhere who want to be in charge of their own bodies and sexuality. We have had to be fierce in fighting for the most basic human rights: the right to own property, the right to travel freely, the right to be educated, the right to choose our own marriage partners, the right to equal treatment before the law, the right to vote, the right not to be raped and not to be blamed when we are, the right not to be beaten by our partners, the right to own our own bodies. The advances we have made in many of these areas don't exist in many parts of the world. And they are increasingly under attack here in these dis-united states. I'm sure that every one of us can think of the names of women— and

men— who have been fierce in their advocacy of justice for women and girls. Perhaps you are one of those people. If so, I salute you and praise you for your fierceness.

So in this Advent season, can we honor Mary in a way that honors her full humanity? If we are going to honor Mary as virginal, let's honor a virginity like Thecla's, a virginity of protest against male and political domination and oppression. If we are going to honor Mary as obedient, let's honor her obedience to God's call to name and rail against injustice, as she does in her magnificent *Magnificat*. If we are going to honor Mary's feminine virtues, let's honor and include in those virtues strength, courage, resilience, and, yes, fierceness, because the young woman who sang the Magnificat was fierce in "proclaiming a revolution of justice." And we should be, too.

Amen.