

MARY – HIS MOTHER, OUR MODEL
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Our scripture today is from the gospel of Luke. Verses 26-38, the announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus. “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David and the virgin’s name was Mary. He came to her and said, ‘Hail, O favored one. The Lord is with you.’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most high and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ And Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be since I have no husband?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. Behold your kinswoman, Elizabeth, in her old age has also conceived a son^{~~~~~} and this is the sixth month with her who was called the barren, for with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.”

Our Christmas meditation today I have entitled Mary – his mother, our model. Perhaps in this history of the Christian church there has been no single person over which controversy has raged than the mother of our Lord – Mary. Reactions to Mary range from worshipping her on the one hand to ignoring her on the other hand. It is easy to see why the medieval church would feel very close to Mary. For God the Father was so very far removed in the heavens. Jesus was always pictured as on the cross in agony. Mary alone seemed touchable, human.

We need to also understand what has been the traditional Protestant reaction to Mary because of the teaching in scripture that there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. But with the reactions that have swirled around her can we find in scripture a balanced understanding which shows her indeed as the one favored of God and therefore a fitting model for us to celebrate life and Christmas. Who was Mary and in what way was she a model to us at this Christmas time?

Look with me at Mary’s relationship with God. It shines so very clearly in the scripture I have shared today. What were the ingredients of that relationship, which strike us as modeling the kinds of relationship the Lord wants in our lives?

Obviously the first impression is she is a moral person. She is named as a virgin. She was upright in her character. She also strikes me in her relationship to God as being a normal person. What kind of a reaction would you have if an angel appeared to you and brought you the news that he brought to Mary? That reaction that Mary projects is the reaction of being troubled. It is just the kind of reaction we would expect of such a message. She was greatly troubled in her mind, casting around in herself as to what the meaning of this was. And again, she had a normal reaction when she is told by the angel that she is to give birth without having had a husband. How can this be? It is not the kind of question that Zahariah asked. That was asked more from a standpoint of unbelief and therefore he was struck dumb. Mary’s question appears to arise not so

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much from unbelief in the angel's message but rather instead arises from how is it going to be accomplished? What is the method that is going to be involved?

Mary also in her relationship with God shows forth in this passage as a woman of belief. She said to the angel when his appearance to her was at its end "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." She believed that the Lord would accomplish the word, which had been promised her. If the angel indeed indicated that Elizabeth who was a woman known as one barren should now be with child, through the miraculous intervention of God why then in her own life would anything be impossible. The angel had brought the news, With God nothing shall be impossible. She believed.

There's a tremendous difference between believing and gullibility. To be a believer is not to be a gullible person. But it is to make a step of faith based upon the evidences, which God provides that he will keep his word. An example of gullibility is belief in Santa Claus. An example of faith is belief in Jesus. Sometimes people treat the two as the same. At Christmas we have Santa Claus and Jesus as if both belong to the realm of mythology. But the difference is quickly established when you begin looking at the fact that I don't know anyone who prays to Santa Claus. And I don't know anyone when they hit their thumb with a hammer uses as a curse word "Santa Claus!" and I don't know if I've ever heard anywhere over the world that people gather at least once a week to worship Santa Claus. Nor have I ever heard of anyone being killed for his faith in Santa Claus. Recant Santa Claus or die! My children are already recanting him. They have found out who he really is.

Belief in Jesus is another story. The story is rooted in reality. Mary in her relationship with God is a woman who is alive spiritually. It shows in her greeting to Elizabeth, the magnificat in Luke 1:46-55 where she bursts out in song upon that meeting with her cousin Elizabeth. In that song which is her own special arrangement if you will of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, it reflects that she has gone through that sifting of the scripture with the experience which is happening to her and has embedded into her life the words of God to describe the experience that she was having – God, who is at work to bring his spiritual revolution into the world, a moral revolution to bring the proud down and the humble up. A political revolution to put down the mighty from their throne. And exalt those of low degree. An economic revolution. To send those who think they have enough away empty and those who recognize they are poor to fill them up. All speaking in spiritual terms of the mission of Messiah. She was not only to have a child, she was to understand what was being involved in the meaning of that child's coming.

But I think in her relationship with God, the most striking quality that comes to me is that like us she is a recipient of grace. The angel twice indicates to her that she has found favor with God. In the English translation the word comes across as favor but it is rooted in that word which consistently throughout the New Testament is translated as grace. Mary, one having received grace from God. The grace-life.

In fact the phrase which is found in the angel's first word to her "Hail, Mary, O favored one." The "O favored one" in verb form there's only one other place in the New Testament where that word is again found in verb form. It is in Ephesians 1:6 when Paul says of us that God destined us in love to be his sons to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed upon us in the beloved. In other words, the same word which is used to describe the grace of God for Mary is the word which is used to describe the grace of God for us. The idea of Mary as a graced person does not carry with it the association of Mary being full of grace to the effect that she

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dispenses grace. But rather she is one who receives grace. What is the qualification for receiving grace? Is it works? No. As a pure and beautiful a life as Mary had when the grace of God comes it comes as a result of God's compassion and God's love and God's initiation. Even Mary like us is not worthy of the grace of God. But God in his great love for Mary and for us and the human race has given to us Jesus, the Christ. The bestowal of grace upon Mary takes away the notion that you have to be mean in order to experience God's grace. Paul was mean and he was the apostle of grace when he got saved. But Mary, a beautiful human being, yet in order to bring Jesus into the world needed to experience God's grace. In no human life can Jesus be born unless God's grace makes it possible.

There was in the scripture also the indication of another relationship that Mary had. She was not only beautifully related to God she was beautifully related to her husband Joseph. To be favored of God is not to be set aside and then monastically isolated from persons. But to be graced of God is to be joined in the wholeness of human relationships. God so appointed a wonderful husband Joseph, for Mary. Matthew indicates very clearly that Joseph knew Mary not until she had brought forth the Christ child. That word "He knew her not until" indicates that after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had the normal human relationship that comes in being husband and wife. The word for "know" is the same word here that is used in Genesis 4:1 "Now Adam knew his wife and she conceived and brought forth Cain." We know from the New Testament that there were at least six other children born to their home – James, Joseph, Simon, Judas, and at least two sisters for the word "sister" is in the plural. Jesus the oldest of at least seven children. Can you imagine in their home when Jesus was about ten what kinds of responsibilities that Jesus had not only as the son of Mary but as the elder brother. His being an elder brother so beautifully describes also the role that he has in relationship to us. For he's not only our savior but there is that certain sense that we can always look at his life and recognize that he's been there before us. He's the older brother who knows how to console and how to give strength and how to go through this experience.

When Jesus teaches in Mark 10:6-7 about a normal home life "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined unto his wife and they too shall become one flesh," it seems to me a natural understanding that his picture of marriage not only arises from his being united with the heart of God on the subject but from seeing a beautiful home pattern in his own relationship. Not a home where Mary and Joseph kept to themselves in separate rooms and had very little contact with one another. But a real life relating family. A family that had known the tough times but it had known the good times as well. A special kind of closeness.

Speaking of the tough times, maybe when Joseph and Mary looking back of course the toughest time they had was on that road to Bethlehem. Their experience of the Christ child coming into their home was one which was difficult for them but gladly did they share that experience together. Beautiful model of relationship with people even as marriage relationship with Joseph through the number of children born to them show a beauty in relationship.

A third area of relationship where Mary becomes a real model to us is Mary's relationship to her own son, Jesus. It was Jesus who would grow under her care especially although Joseph's as well. It would be she who would hear him say his first words, who would sing to him, who would watch him take his first steps, and who would brush the tears from his eyes. Yet as Jesus grew in regard to his mother the overwhelming evidence of scripture as you examine it microscopically and note each setting in which Mary and Jesus are named together you will find that the overriding concern of Jesus in regard to his relationship to his mother during his adult

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life is to transfer his mother's relationship to him from a biological sphere to a spiritual sphere. Over and over again it shines forth.

Simeon had noted this that day when Mary had brought him to the temple. He had said to Mary, A sword shall pierce through your own heart also. When Jesus is but twelve years of age Mary comes to him and finds him in the temple – they had missed him for three days – your father and I have been looking for you anxiously. Jesus replied to her was stunning, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house.” Deliberately Jesus contracts “Your father – Joseph – and I have been looking for you,” Jesus says, “Now you must get used to the relationship. It is my Father's business that I am about.”

At the first miracle, the wedding of Cana, Mary asks Jesus to do something about the lack of wine. He responds to her, “Woman, what have you to do with me?” That is to say, Do you realize now the situation is shifting? No longer can you simply relate to me on the biological level as my mother. In fact, Jesus will go on to say when his mother and his brothers come looking for him on one occasion to bring him home because they're beginning to feel that maybe he's taken a step too far and he hasn't been the kind of king that they had expected. Jesus turns around to the crowd and he says, “Who is my brother and my sister and my mother?” And he answers his own question: “Whoever does my Father's will is my brother and my sister and my mother.”

When Jesus was blessed by women who called out to him in Luke 11:27-28 “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked.” He said to them, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

Jesus in his great love for his mother gradually was able to transfer that relationship so that more than simply being his mother on a biological sphere through his life that was shed on Calvary which embraces the whole human race for all have sinned and come short of God's glory Mary herself had entered into the richness and the treasure of the salvation which Jesus had won through his intercession in life.

Jesus gently brought his mother to himself.

Mary shines out in one other relationship, which is a model. Her relationship to the church. In Acts 1:14 after Jesus' ascension into heaven we are given a description of the 120 who are the first Christian congregation gathering together in worship. Luke notes “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary his mother, the mother of Jesus, with his brothers.” Mary was there on the day of Pentecost. In that ten day interval between the ascension and Pentecost when the early church was gathered for prayer, Mary had not withdrawn herself from the Christian congregation. Nor did she even put herself in a role of leading it. But she has taken her part as one of the faithful. It's one thing for Jesus to be born to the world. It's another thing for Jesus to be born into our lives. But if we never really realize the purpose for his coming that we must have from the story of his birth into the experience of his life and worship together, and this means regularly coming together with the people of God to worship and to share the experience of the blessings of God's Spirit.

Has it ever struck you that Luke who was the chronicler of most of the nativity, more about the nativity than any of the other gospels, perhaps knew Mary the best? But as you look at the gospels how remarkably deficient they are in regard to stories from the childhood of Jesus. Very

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few. I wonder if perhaps this may have come from Mary's own reluctance, realizing the significance of Jesus after his birth and after the visit to the temple when he was twelve, he significance of Jesus comes in his ministry which he began when he was thirty. When after his temptation he came in the power of the Spirit and began to minister.

Jesus was honored by his mother in her becoming a regular part of the community which was gathered in his name. I think we honor Jesus and honor his mother when we as well become a regular part of those who worship him all through life.

Mary in her relationship to God shows herself as one filled with grace in her relationship to her husband Joseph she shows herself as a beautiful wife and mother. In her relationship with Jesus she shows herself as one who is transferred from the biological understanding of being the mother of the Lord to that spiritual perception of being at the foot of the cross and worshipping Jesus, her Son. And she shows a beautiful model to us as well in being associated with the church which is gathered in the Lord's name.

Whenever Christ is born into the world, whenever Christ is born into our hearts there is cost involved. For Mary it cost her reputation. Years later there still rumors I'm sure at Nazareth as to the circumstances of his birth. It cost something to Mary to be the vessel through which the Son of God would enter the world. It cost her also hardship. She could have said no that day to the angel and avoided all that trek to Bethlehem and avoided those two years in exile in Egypt, those years of hardship when they were running for their life. Sure they could say no to the message of Christmas and miss the hardship. But to miss the hardship that sometimes comes with being identified with his name is to miss the glory of all that is associated with his name.

Mary simply believed the word of the angel Gabriel when he said to her, With God nothing shall be impossible. Jesus speaks to us and says, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believeth in me though he were dead yet shall he live and whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. I hear after that phrase the angel's word coming to us again, For with God nothing shall be impossible. It was just as impossible for a virgin to conceive a child as it is impossible for me to when I die to be risen again from the dead. But with God whether it be a dead body in the physical sense or a womb that cannot bear because there's been no husband, what ever the case because of Jesus and God's desire to save us there is nothing with him that is impossible. Amen!

You may have thought it's impossible for God to save me but it's not. And there's no better Christmas than this Christmas to say in your heart, Jesus is Lord.

Our Father, we close this Christmas hour in the conscious realization that Jesus is here and the Spirit of our God has glorified Jesus in this hour. We thank you for coming into the world. We realize that you'll never come again as a baby. That time is over for you. But it will always be in our minds that you became vulnerable, became weak, became poor for us. Now we not only know your power as the God who creates but we know your power as the God who loves and who for our sake came into the world. Lord Jesus, for any human life here that is without you being born into them may this Christmas day be a moment of birth in which spiritually you are born into their lives. Wherever you are born we know, Lord, that you will grow up. In that human life in which you are born there will be a witness to your growth and stature and their growth. There will be the kind of peace and deep settledness that no matter what comes in life whether it be the gift of wise men which bring wealth or whether it be the hardship of a stable and a manger, when you have come it is

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indeed peace on earth, peace in the human heart and joy to the world. In Jesus' name.
Amen.