

“Mary: The One Who Said Yes”

Theme: Saving Jesus - part 1

Luke 1:29-55



Rev. Dr. Martha Page Greene
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I will never forget it. My best friend from Kalamazoo, Michigan invited me to attend her son’s wedding at a Catholic Church in Winnetka, Illinois, where, at that time, I happened to be serving a Presbyterian Church. The name of the Catholic Church where the wedding was to take place was “Faith, Hope, and Charity.” Faith Hope and Charity is a beautiful, massive stone structure whose spires proudly rise above the trees of north-shore suburban Chicago, it has a high-ceilinged sanctuary with wonderful reverberant acoustics and stained glass windows. Because of its wealthy parishioners, ornate sanctuary—and a persistent rumor that its microphones were gold-plated—the church was popularly referred to as “Faith Hope and Cadillac.”

The service began in much pomp and circumstance, with a processional that included, believe it or not, a Maypole and dancing girls. The priest proceeded with a lengthy statement of purpose, a handful of scripture readings, and a series of solemn prayers—and suddenly the service seemed to come to a halt and the bride went over to her mother, who stood up and accompanied her to the left hand

corner of the sanctuary where the statue of the virgin Mary was poised. They paused there for a moment, looked up at Mary with great reverence, whispered to one another, and lingered a few more moments before returning to their respective places. The marriage ceremony resumed.

My Protestant background and sensibilities were pulsating at that moment. I turned to Sandy, my good Catholic friend who was sitting next to me, and said, “What on earth were they doing over there?” Sandy explained that as a young woman entered the sanctity of marriage and presumably motherhood, it was traditional for the women of a Catholic family to pay a visit to Mary and to honor her.

Protestants, including myself, have not understood Mary very well. Recently two Presbyterian women theologians collaborated on a book entitled “Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary.” Until the release of this book, most Protestants had ignored Mary from January through November, but then on the First Sunday of Advent, until Christmas, we opened our theological box, unwrapped her, and carefully placed her in the center of our attention until New Year’s Day. Then we put her away again. But for this brief Advent/ Christmas period when we do honor Mary, we do so as Mary, the mother of Jesus, her face tranquil with Oil of Olay milky smooth skin, eyes cast downward- an image of perfection and sinlessness.

Protestants have objected to a number of doctrines that have emerged about Mary, and I might remind you of what they are: the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary which states that Mary remained a virgin all of her life; the assumption of Mary, which states that Mary arose in body and soul into heavenly glory; and of course the Immaculate Conception, which maintains that from the first moment of her conception, Mary was kept free from the stain of original sin.

Medieval theologians, and artists who were guided by them claimed that God’s seed was carried to Mary in the beak of the Holy Dove. Others said it came from Gabriel’s mouth to be filtered through the sacred lily before entering Mary’s body by way of her ear. It is these doctrines and images that have subtly seeped into our Protestant consciousness when we think about Mary.

Our portrait of Mary comes from the gospel of Luke, which has sometimes been called “the woman’s gospel” because Mary figures so prominently, as do other women. In Matthew’s gospel, Joseph is center stage, but not here in Luke...in fact Joseph doesn’t seem to matter at all in this narrative. Today’s reading from Luke, called the Magnificat, is the longest speech Mary ever makes. Her song became one of the oldest canticles of the church and it is about Mary’s dawning understanding of what her baby would mean to the world.

We know that Mary’s song echoes a similar song sung by Hannah, found in I Samuel 2. I am not suggesting that Mary was plagiarizing here. I am simply reminding us that Mary might have known the song that had been sung over a thousand years previously by her kinswoman Hannah. Hannah had grown old and despaired of ever having a child until the Lord heard her prayer and blessed her with Samuel. When the boy Samuel was born, she sang, “My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in God...The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.” (I Sam. 2:4-5).

Many scholars believe that Hannah’s and Mary’s song came out of the community of the *anawim*, or the poor and afflicted of Israel, because as you hear it, you will not hear a woman who is humble and submissive, you hear the voice of a revolutionary. Think not of “gentle Mary, meek and mild.” Think, Jewish mother. Bella Abzug. Think Miriam, the Hebrew for Mary, Miriam, who instigated a rebellion against Moses when he married a Cushite woman. Bruce Larson tells us that it is a mistake to spiritualize the Magnificat. The words in this song are the most revolutionary words ever spoken. Through the Messiah, Mary says, the mighty will be brought low; the humble and the lowly will be exalted.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, warned his missionaries to India never to read the Magnificat in public. Christians were already suspect in that country and they were cautioned against reading verses so inflammatory. What Mary was singing is terrifying to those in power, whoever and wherever they are. In fact, if we listen to Mary, it requires a conversion of the imagination, because everything

she sings runs so counter to the world of conventional perception.

Students of Jesus have often wondered where Jesus got his view of the world. How is it that he identified with the poor? Why was he so unmasculine in his rejection of the sword, of violence as the way of the future, of competition as the source of power and wealth? Where did he get the idea that abundance does not lie in doing well, but in doing good? Listen to the words of Mary's song and you will discover where Jesus got his image of the world and of the will of God. He got it at the knee of his mother. Could it be these ideas were the things Mary and Elizabeth talked about for three months?

Here is the question I want to ask today: would we have sung if we had been Mary? The fact of the matter is, if we had been in Mary's position, we might *not* have sung. She was a mere girl of thirteen or fourteen. She was, like most girls her age, betrothed to a man chosen by her parents. She lives in a society that enforced the law of Deuteronomy 22 that stated that any unmarried woman who became pregnant was a candidate for stoning. We have a current event swirling about in our midst this very week with the story of the young unmarried woman from Saudi Arabia who has been sentenced for 200 lashes and a year in prison. No matter that she and the unmarried young man she was with were raped by a gang of thugs. She is to be punished, merely for sitting in a car talking to a man who was not her relative. It is in this kind of environment that Mary found herself. If talking to an unrelated male creates this kind of frenzy, imagine the impact of an unmarried pregnant girl.

So we can infer that she is scared, so scared that she asks her mother and father if she can leave town and go visit her cousin Elizabeth in the high country of Judah. Elizabeth is much older than she, but with terror in her heart she seeks her out. Imagine Mary's astonishment to find this very old cousin, with wrinkles on her face, and sun spots on her veined hand, full in the belly expecting child. Elizabeth sees Mary staring at her protruding belly and laughs out loud, saying to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Mary is totally confused. How did Elizabeth know? Had the angel been here too? So, Mary, relieved beyond belief, sighs and out pours a song. In spite of the shame and dishonor, Mary sings. But this is no lullaby. The words pour forth like a battle chant. "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and the rich he has sent empty away." This is a song we might have expected in the 60's in Berkeley, California, or out of the mouth of Che Guevara, but not a song along side "Silent Night" and 'Away in the Manger."

Mary's song is a song about the low going up, and someone up high being brought low. You won't hear women singing like this except on the slave auction block as they watch their children being sold. Or you might hear it in Somalia or the Sudan, as the mothers watch their children die of hunger, and know this is not the world as God intended it. Even more puzzling, Mary sings her song in the past tense, as though it has all been accomplished.

So here we have Mary. Not the sweet, gentle, eyes cast down, lily white Mary. No, we see Mary, dark skinned, rough hands only a poor peasant girl could have, protruding belly, unmarried and in threat of being stoned by a mob, singing about a new world order. She doesn't sing about herself or her condition, she sings about kings and queens leaving town in a hurry, their crowns flattened in the dust behind them. She sings of beggars clothed in velvet and satin, filling their stomachs with pheasant under glass and crême brulee. And she sings, not of her husband Joseph, but of God who is ushering in something entirely new. Her baby is nothing but an aggregate of embryonic cells, yet she is singing about a new kingdom and a new king. I can't imagine how she could sing.

There is something about music that has the power to release, cut loose, pull down, raise up. Let us try to hear Mary's Magnificat, sung not by Amy Grant or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but belted out by Janis Joplin or Aretha Franklin and you'll get the picture. We shatter the power of the Word when we make Mary too gentle and too other-worldly. Mary is like all of us who are weary of the exces-

sive and extravagant Christmases amidst a world filled with bloated bellies, and young black men being shot in gang warfare on the streets of Philadelphia while their mothers and fathers weep. Learning to live a Christian way of life means learning to sing in hope when the world around us does not share our values.

We may be amazed then, that Mary said yes to God. But she just didn't merely say yes to bearing Jesus, she said yes to an alternative vision of the world. She said yes to the victories accomplished by her son and the way he changed the world. Mary knew what the English poet Blake knew: "Everything that we now know to be true, was at one time only imagined." I am astonished at Mary's obedience.

There is no telling what God will do, when we say yes to God as Mary did. And so let us sing. Despite a world like ours, let us sing. We sing because we believe God can turn everything upside down. We sing because we believe, and we believe because we sing. We have trusted in ideas, programs, people, and governments and they haven't delivered what we long for. Today, Luke directs us to the one who *does* deliver: Mary and even more, our Lord Jesus whom Mary magnifies.