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There's Something About Mary

The Rev. Simone Hurkmans
August 15, 2021, St. Mary the Virgin

Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

I think the French version of the Hail Mary is burned in my brain from having grown up in the Roman Catholic tradition. When you think about Mary, what images come to mind? Serene in a blue dress and head scarf. Heavily pregnant on a donkey. Weeping at the foot of the cross. What else? What influences our thoughts about Jesus' earthly mother?

We Anglicans have a hard time with Mary, don't we? We get uncomfortable with the whole Mary interceding for us, the medallions and statues. It's all just a little too Catholic for us. And then there's the whole virgin birth business. Was Mary a virgin or wasn't she? We can't logically make sense of it, so we tend to just ignore it, la la la.

This morning I'm going to challenge us to move past these traditional images of Mary. I'm going to challenge us to go deeper. To see how Mary can become a vibrant character in our lives of faith. Not so that we can pray to her or make her



ST ALBANS

an idol. Simply so that she can help us become closer to God, our creator. I'm going to challenge us to see Mary as a model of trust in God; as a comforter; and as a prophet and even activist.

Mary is a model of trust in God. We can get carried away ruminating about the virgin birth. When we do that, we miss the whole point of the story. The story is about Mary saying "yes" to God. That's the point. The angel Gabriel comes to her to announce the wonderful news that she is to bear the Son of God, the Messiah. Mary freaks out, of course she does. She asks question: "how can this be?" That's the outside voice question. Can you imagine what the inside voice questions were? "WTH" "What will Joseph say?" "How will my parents react?" But ultimately, she says, out loud: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". She says "yes".

How do we answer God? You're going to say, "Simone, the angel Gabriel never shows up with this kind of news, this doesn't happen to me." But it does happen. God is present in our lives all the time. God nudges us in various ways. "Go and talk to that person". "Apologize to your sister for being harsh the other day". "Apply for that job." How do we answer? If I'm honest with myself, pretty often I give God a big "no thanks". Why do I say no? Because it's hard. Because it's scary. Because I don't trust that I have what it takes to do what God asks. What would happen if we said "yes" more often? What would happen if we trusted more, as Mary did?

Second, I'm inviting us to see Mary as a comforter. It's easy to just fall into the traditional image of Mary as that placid, lady in blue we see in ancient paintings, smiling demurely. But we have to imagine Mary in her humanness too. Do you remember the Bible story where Jesus is preaching and his disciples say: "Hey Jesus, your mother and brothers are here." And how does Jesus reply? "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Can you picture Mary eye-rolling off to the side? Like, seriously Jesus, c'mon.



ST ALBANS

Or when Jesus is twelve and he is supposed to be following the caravan home from the festival. But he's decided to stay behind and teach in the Temple. What would Mary's reaction have been? Probably like most mothers: a mixture of terror and anger. What did you think you were doing staying behind? I was worried sick! It's this Mary, a very human Mary, that I'd like us to picture when we think about her as comforter.

I had a couple of postcards of Mary pinned to my office bulletin board at All Saints'. Nick is going to show them for us. The first is a painting of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus. I couldn't find the actual postcard as I haven't yet unpacked my boxes. But I googled it to show you.

Turns out there is a ton of art depicting Mary breastfeeding. I quickly went down a rabbit hole looking at dozens of paintings and statues. Apparently, the Vatican announced a few years back that it wants to uncover all of this ancient art. Apparently these paintings were common until the late Renaissance and were called Madonna del Latte¹. Who knew?

As a breastfeeding mom myself, I love this image. Mary physically feeding Jesus with her body. Giving birth is a very human thing. Keeping Jesus fed and clean was a very human thing. Can we picture her as a mom providing for her son's physical needs?

In the Eastern traditions especially, Mary is called Theotokos, which means God-bearer. What a physical term this is. All of us mothers (and fathers) do the best we can. Sometimes we fall short. Sometimes our own mothers and fathers fell short, or continue to fall short. Can we picture Mary as a universal mother, providing for all

¹https://www.thestar.com/life/parent/2010/04/13/facebook_furor_as_nursing_mother_paintings_censored.html



ST ALBANS

our needs? A mother who doesn't fall short. A mother always there for us, comforting, supporting, encouraging.

The second postcard on my bulletin board was an image of German painting from around 1700 called "Mary Undoer of Knots". In it, an angel to Mary's left is handing her a length of rope that is all wadded up in knots. Mary is busy untying them, and she hands the free rope to an angel on her right.

What I love about this painting is that she has a peaceful look on her face. She's not frustrated or annoyed at having to untie all these knots. Her face doesn't say "another frigging knot". She's just there, untying knots. When my friend Victoria showed this painting to her daughter Annabel who was 8 or 9 at the time, Annabel simply said. "Oh. Life knots". It's okay for us to hand over our life knots to Mary. She can handle it.

Lastly, I'd like to leave us with the image of Mary as a prophet and activist. A prophet is not someone who predicts the future, but someone who speaks for God. Who calls it like it is. Mary is a prophet when she says "yes" to the angel Gabriel and "yes" to God. This morning we heard the Magnificat, a beautiful song of praise. Mary describes who God is. She can describe who God is because she has experienced God.

She tells us that God is merciful, that God is all-powerful, that God scatters the proud, casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. She is an activist. She speaks for God. What would she tell us today, in the midst of seeming catastrophic climate change? What would she tell us today, as we grapple with the legacy of the residential school systems and injustice perpetrated on Indigenous peoples? What would she tell us about God's love for creation and all those who inhabit it?



ST ALBANS

Mary trusts, comforts and speaks for God. My question for Open Space today is this: How can we reclaim Mary as a relevant model of faith, both personally, and as a community?