

ADVENT FOUR, YEAR B, DECEMBER 17, 2023

Who is Mary? It seems like everyone has a different answer to that question. For many she is the ideal woman—one who was soft-spoken, submissive, meek. To some in our culture Mary is a ceramic or plastic figure gazing at the manger that is taken out of storage for a few days a year.

To our Roman Catholic friends, she is a venerated figure and someone who acts as a go between us and God. During the Middle Ages, when the church's leadership became more and more distant from the people, Mary became important in the prayer lives of the common folk. She was seen as one who could empathize with their plight and mediate forgiveness. However, in the hierarchy of the Church through the centuries, she gradually gained in supernatural qualities. She was declared absolutely free from personal sin before her birth; she remained perpetually a virgin and did not die a natural death but was taken directly from earth to heaven. Protestants feel Roman Catholics have deified Mary to the extreme and declared her the ideal woman which she is not. Others see her role as just a peasant woman chosen to facilitate the arrival of the Son of God into the world. So Roman Catholics feel that Protestants underemphasize Mary's role in salvation history which sets up opposing notions about her.

Both worship of Mary and reducing Mary to her biological role miss out on something very important: Mary's example as a person of faith, struggling with the daily demands of her life. It is this Mary who can help us prepare for the coming of Jesus.

It is in the gospel of Luke that portrays the fullness of Mary's humanity as an example of faith for us. Luke portrays her in a startling role: one that shakes up the way we've been brought up to think of her and invites us to stop observing her and start imitating her.

For Luke, Mary is first a prophet which is contrary to what we often think of Mary. Most Christians see Mary as being quiet and passive not outspoken and bold for justice, like a prophet. Yet in the Cantic of Mary she sings a song of praise to God who shakes up the status quo, who lifts up the humble like her, and chooses her, rather than a high born woman, to be the bearer of God's Son.

If we have trouble seeing gentle Mary meek and mild as a prophet, we need to remind ourselves that her call mirrors those of the Old Testament prophets. Mary is a model of "unparalleled courage" and just like the prophets in scripture there really was nothing special about Mary, nothing to mark her as particularly worthy of God's notice or favor. In fact, she was rather ordinary—a young girl about to be married to a mere carpenter, living in an insignificant town in a backwater province. Nothing about her life suggested that she would play an integral role in God's plan for salvation. Yet Mary's very ordinariness, rather than being a discouragement, is encouraging. Luke's Gospel is distinct in its insistence that God invites ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Few people can live up to an "ideal," but everyone can make a choice. Mary's courage, her choice to say yes to God's call, opened her to a life utterly illumined by God's grace.

God's grace in Mary's life was a strange kind of blessing. Gabriel greets her as "highly favored" and yet, by our standards, her life is anything but. None of the goals we associate with favor—namely, social stature and wealth—came her way. Instead, she faced shame, dishonor, and public disgrace as she bore a child out of wedlock. She was forced to flee her home and live as a refugee. She bore the gossip and stigma of

speculations about Jesus's mental sanity as he began his ministry. Ultimately, she saw her son executed as a criminal. But, as R. Alan Culpepper so aptly reminds us, "acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God's blessing."

Were they so, Mary may have despaired. Her life was not marked by these things yet over and over again we see the same courage that marked her first "yes" as she steadfastly faced disruption, discouragement, and pain throughout her life. She trusts in God's promise. From that trust, came the blessing she shared with God as a partner in God's mission of redemption.

Mary's life is quite ordinary and I wonder if it isn't in ordinary life where we see the greatest courage at work? I think of the people who embody the courage of Mary, who embody the hope and trust in God's promise of redemption despite the everyday suffering of life that would seem to belay that promise. I think of the man who lost his job, ended up on the streets, and as a last ditch effort went to a nonprofit hiring agency where he discovered ordinary people who reminded him that he was valuable, a person of great worth, and how he now works every day to bring the same hope to others in the situation he found himself in. I think of the wives, husbands, sons, and daughters who care every day for loved ones experiencing illness and disease, for whom there is no cure in sight, who give the gift of dignity at the end of life. I think of the social workers, and teachers, and guardians who give their time, effort, and energy to care and advocate for children who have no one who cares for them. I think of all those who offer their time and ability to take care of the "least of these." I think of the people in our congregations who are willing to risk entering into a relationship with someone who is completely unlike them, in order to share the love of God. I think of ordinary people who are willing to hear God's claim on their lives, who say yes to the seemingly impossible and who open themselves to a life utterly illumined and undergirded by God's own grace.

You know the word annunciation just means an announcement. There are annunciations of one sort or another in most lives. The grace of God, and the ability to partner with God, is offered to us in everyday moments, in everyday situations. Like Mary, we are each offered the choice integral to humanness to step out of our comfort zones and hear what God is asking of us. May we be as courageous as Mary in our response to God's call: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Amen.