

Full of Grace

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016.

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18

When my daughter was a young girl, she arrived home from school one day to tell me that one of her friends told her that, “our church didn’t believe in the Blessed Mother.” Mindful of the need to be brief but honest in answering a child’s questions, I explained that we do believe in Mary and honor her for being the mother of Jesus.

For many of us there is a good deal of mystery and myth surrounding the person of Mary. Over the centuries she has become an object of veneration, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction. Much of what has accumulated about her is not supported in the scriptures. A good place to begin to understand the character of Mary is in what the Bible does say about her.

Mary is a product of her time and culture. She is an innocent young woman understandably bewildered and frightened when she learns that she is with child. She wonders how this can be. As an unmarried woman, she feels alone and is afraid. She fears that Joseph, to whom she is betrothed, will reject and abandon her. Indeed Joseph was of a mind to break off their engagement until he was encouraged by an angel in a dream to take Mary as his wife.

While Mary never dreamed that God would choose her for such an important role, it is again in a dream that Joseph is warned to escape Herod’s wrath in his order to slaughter all males under the age of two to insure that he would have no rival to his power. Instead of returning to their home in Nazareth, Joseph seeks refuge for his family in Egypt. As shockingly cruel as the story of the slaughter of innocents is, genocide is still a reality in Syria and other parts of the world today.

Both Mary and Joseph are faithful to what God wants for them in their role in salvation history. Mary willingly accepts her role as the channel through whom God entered into the human condition. Jesus’ birth and mission as well as his death and resurrection are all the work of the Holy Spirit. If this is perplexing and difficult to comprehend, we need to leave room in our faith system that much of what seems humanly impossible is quite possible with God. It is a great mystery in itself that the Creator became part of the creation.

We need not be too concerned over the biological circumstances of the birth of Jesus. As an unmarried young woman, Mary is the handmaid of God whose child is conceived of the Holy Spirit. In a sense, every child, both wanted and unwanted, are from God. At baptism, we acknowledge that a child belongs to God. As parents, our children are only on loan to us until they reach maturity and are ready to go out on their own. The seal that is set at baptism is indissoluble and their bond with God cannot be broken.

Because she was chosen for the unique role of being the bearer of the Christ child, Mary is the most honored of all people in history. We are not certain if she fully understood the nature of her son or his mission. If she was perplexed about having this child born to her, she must also have been bewildered that her child would be the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Like any new mother, Mary loves her child and wants the best for him and shares in his joys and sorrows. She made a home for her family when they returned to Nazareth and helped shape his character in his formative years. She raised him to maturity and never attempted to stand in his way. After the resurrection, she was very much a part of the growing Christian community. Her example of obedience and trust in God’s purpose serves as an inspiration when we are called to tasks not of our choosing.

As Jesus grew to maturity and began his ministry, Mary realized that she would have to share him with a great many people. In the end, she would have to suffer the torment of seeing him put to death on a cross like a common criminal. His sacrificial death is our great example of forgiveness. What greater honor than for Mary to be the earthly vessel for bringing the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation to the world. Mary is an example for us when we are disappointed in our expectations and when things don’t turn out the way we hoped. She is an inspiration for when we are confronted by what we don’t understand and for which there are no explanations.

We need to look beyond Mary as a plaster statue goddess to a woman who accepted her role as an instrument of God's grace. She is a source of inspiration for her willingness to accept what she could not possibly comprehend. An ancient Irish legend says that when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was chosen for her unique role, the sun, the moon and stars and all the planets came to a halt and stood still for that one breathless moment until Mary accepted her role. Only then did the universe resumed its motion.

Mary means different things to different people. I grew up in a protestant or what was referred to as the "low church" tradition of the Episcopal Church in which we avoided anything identified as catholic or "high church." I am glad that we have recovered important aspects of our catholic heritage. I have come to appreciate Mary as our connection with the humanity and divinity of Jesus who, in turn, is our link with God. I have come to appreciate Mary's example of patience in allowing God's will to be accomplished in her by making what seems impossible to be possible.

We spend much of our lives in waiting. We wait for the birth of a child, for delayed appointments and deliveries, for repairmen who never arrive and for phone calls and E-mails never answered. Mary is an example for us to remember that all things are accomplished in God's time and not our own. She is an example of how we can be instruments of God's grace in the unfolding drama of salvation.

When Roman Catholics join the Episcopal Church, I am often asked if they have to give up their devotion to Mary. I assure them that they should feel free to keep whatever devotion has meaning for them. There is always room in our faith journey for whatever brings us closer to the heart of God.