

In Search for the Real Mary–Part II

Woman of Faith

Mary walked in a way that each of us probably prays for often. That is, she walked by faith, not by sight. As one theologian once remarked, “She did not have the dogma of the Immaculate Conception framed and hung on her kitchen wall.” Scripture does tell us however that she asked questions. She pondered the things in her heart and she went on faithfully believing even when grief stabbed her to the heart. She also had a relationship with God that was profound. During Mary’s time, people’s hope for the coming of the Messiah included the hope that He would liberate them from the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Luke’s gospel dealing with the infancy narrative gives a particular twist to our memory of Mary’s faith by placing her in a key position of partnership with God to bring about the birth of Jesus Christ. Modern theologians have analyzed the Annunciation scene in such a way that Mary was called to the vocation of being God’s partner in the work of redemption on the model of the call to Moses at the burning bush.

It is a prophetic call, a call of vocation to be a partner with God in this great work. Mary gives her free assent, launching her life on a path with an outcome that even she does not know.

Miraculously, her very pregnancy takes place through the power of the Spirit. Consequently, she walks by faith, not by sight.

For me, this part of the story of Mary's life—her being chosen to be the Mother of God—sounds a powerful theme for women today. Sojourner Truth, the 19th century freed slave and suffragette, was speaking once in a public hall where a group of black-clad clerics were arguing that she should not even have the right to be on stage, much less in the hall itself. She responded to their mumbling by asking them, “Where your Christ come from honey? Where you Christ come from? He come from God and a woman. Man had nothin’ to do with it.”

Business as usual in Mary's time including so-called patriarchal marriages is superseded by God. More importantly, God stands with the young woman pregnant outside of marriage and in danger of her own life. God stands with her in order to begin fulfilling the divine promise. Now Mary's faith-filled collaboration with God in the work of liberation is sung out in Luke's Gospel in her magnificent prayer, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46-55). It is the most words spoken by any woman in the New Testament.

Oddly enough, it is a prayer omitted from most traditional Mariology. Here is what happens: Mary is newly pregnant, Elizabeth her cousin, an older woman, is also six months pregnant. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, has been struck speechless for his lack of faith and so there is no male voice heard

in this scenario. The house is quiet of men. Mary arrives and Elizabeth filled with the Spirit, embraces her and signs out, “Blessed art thou among women!” Mary, also filled with the Spirit, breaks into a new prophetic language of faith. She sings a song in the pattern of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Hannah, other great hymn-singers in the Old Testament and she launches into divine praise. Her spirit greatly rejoices in God her savior.

Mary the Magnificat

Though Mary is poor and is a culturally insignificant woman, the powerful living holy God is doing great things to and through her. It is important to recognize here that God does this not only to Mary, but in a sense, to all the poor, bringing down the mighty from their positions of power; exalting the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the unrepentant rich away empty-handed. Marvelously, this is all being accomplished in fulfillment of the ancient promise of the Old Testament prophets—and in her very being for Mary embodies the nobodies of this world on whom God is lavishing rescue.

In this song, she sings of the future too, when eventually peaceful justice will take root in the land among all of the people. This is a great prayer; it is a revolutionary song of salvation. As writer Bill Cleary once commented, “It reveals that Mary was not only full of “grace” but full of political opinions.

Despite what some would have us believe, Mary's song does have political and social implications. With a mother like this, it is no wonder that the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke proclaim that He has come to free the captives and bring good news to the poor. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Throughout her life, Mary lived in solidarity with the coming reign of God, whose intent was to heal, redeem and liberate. It does no honor to reduce Mary's faith to a privatized piety. Worse yet, which sometimes happens in traditional Mariology; is to reduce her faith to a doting mother-son relationship. She hears the word of God and keeps it. What I am suggesting here is that even before Jesus was born she had her own relationship with God that was not focused on Jesus. Even after His death and resurrection, when she is now part of the community proclaiming Him as the Messiah, her pattern of faith is still that of Jewish hope: God's Messiah who now has come will come again and bring justice to all the land.

She hears the word of God and keeps it. And in this too she is, as Pope Paul VI called her in *Marialis Cultus*, "our sister in faith." As we remember her and keep foremost the idea that she is a Jewish peasant woman of faith, then we can interpret the other scenes in the Gospels where Mary shows up and where we are presented with the memory of this very inconsequential woman in her own culture and historical context. With a heart full of love for God

and for her neighbor, Mary of Nazareth gives us this tremendous example of walking by faith through a difficult life.

Mary, our Partner in Hope

Last week, we began by asking what would be a theologically sound, spiritually empowering and ethically challenging view of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, for the 21st century? What we have hopefully learned, since then, is that we remember Mary as a friend of God and prophet in the communion of saints. Let her memory inspire and encourage our own witness.

It is my prayer that you will join with me in relating to Miriam of Nazareth as a partner in hope, in the company of all the holy women and men who have gone before us. This can help us all to reclaim the power of her memory for the flourishing of women, for the poor and for all suffering people. It can help all of us to draw on the energy of her example for a deeper relationship with the living God and stronger care and respect for the world.

When the Christian community looks at Mary in this way, our eyes can be opened to sacred visions for a different future. We can become empowered to be the voices of hope in these extremely difficult times and like Mary, we will be rejoicing in God our savior and announcing the justice that is to come.