

# ***Pondering Mary***

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Isaiah 1:10-11

Luke 1: 35-56

I Samuel 2

Twenty years ago this month I came to Washington DC to teach music at Regina High School, an all girls, Catholic school. The school was sponsored by the Religious of Jesus and Mary and clearly named after Mary, Regina meaning Queen. (I say "was" because the school closed three years later.) One of my first days on the job there was a mass for the Assumption of Mary. Having lived my life within the Mennonite world I had only a vague idea what this meant, either Mass or Assumption of Mary. This past Tuesday, August 15, Assumption was celebrated once again. It seems like an opportunity to take a closer look at Mary.

The assumption of Mary is a tradition, and since 1950 official church teaching, that grows out of Mary's immaculate conception. The Catholic teaching is that it was Mary who was immaculately conceived, conceived without original sin, and in this way she was able to give birth to Jesus who also was without sin. Because she was holy without sin she was assumed into heaven, joined body and soul.

For those of us whose only experience with Mary is in gothic and renaissance artwork or the opening chapters of Luke this all seems confusing and maybe even unnecessary. However, people around the world find great meaning in Mary's life. Mary is not only the mother of Jesus, she is Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, and an intercessor.

Why should we care, we are Mennonites... in Hyattsville Mary-land? Well, not all of us here grew up Mennonite, some of us grew up Catholic. Mary was a big part of the lives of us. Bret Kincaid says:

*Growing up with Mother Mary was great! When I moved into Protestant circles, it was hard giving her up, though she is to me now much like an appendix. During my Catholic years, she always gave me a sense of comfort and consolation, a kind of buffer or salve when I'd think about the stern and demanding God who (likely incidentally) created me as merely an infinitesimally and insignificantly small part of running the cosmos.*

Two years ago Jillian Hershberger converted to Catholicism but was very clear about retaining her Mennonite roots and belief. Having recently moved, she writes:

*"I have friends who grew up Catholic and thought I was totally bananas to join up, but often they have retained a heart-felt connection to Mary.*

*I was comforted here in Santa Fe when I found a small shine under a juniper tree out beyond our wall, and there was a statue of Mary there. Hmmmmmm."*



The connection and comfort that people receive from Mary is a mystery to those of us who grew up knowing only that it was wrong to pray to Mary. But for many people she is much more than just a figure in blue surrounded by lilies in old paintings. Mary puts a human face and, not insignificantly, a feminine face on that which is revered in church.

Mary is not only historical, she is contemporary. You have heard of the sightings of Mary. One happened just last week at a California chocolate factory. I share this not to make fun of the situation but because there is a huge fascination with this phenomenon and it happens with some frequency all over the world. I quote from the news report:

*"Kitchen worker Cruz Jacinto was the first to spot the lump of melted chocolate when she began her shift Monday cleaning up drippings that had accumulated under a large vat of dark chocolate. Chocolate drippings usually harden in thin, flat strips on wax paper, but Jacinto said she froze when she noticed the unusual shape of this cast-off: It looked just like the Virgin Mary on the prayer card she always carries in her right pocket. "When I come in, the first thing I do is look at the clock, but this time I didn't look at the clock. My eyes went directly to the chocolate," Jacinto said. "I thought, 'Am I the only one who can see this? I picked it up and I felt emotion just come over me. "For me, it was a sign," she said. For Jacinto, the discovery came just in time. Raising a son on her own, she has struggled with marital problems for months and said she was about to lose her faith. "I have big problems right now, personally, and lately I've been saying that God doesn't exist," she said, pulling the dog-eared prayer card out of her pocket. "This has given me renewed faith."*

Who am I to question her faith? Or what she sees? When the chocolate is put next to the prayer card, I too can see the virgin mother. Is this a mystery of faith or just someone grasping at chocolate for salvation?

If incidents such as this one leave us laughing and scratching our heads, maybe it is best to go back to the text.

The most common scripture associated with Mary is her song, commonly called the *magnificat* because that is the first line in Latin, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

It is Luke that gives us the *magnificat* and it is usually associated and compared with the song of Hannah in I Samuel of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The similarities are not hard to find.

Hannah says: *"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength."*

Mary says: *"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."*

Hannah declares: *"The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap."*

Mary says: *"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;"*

Hannah says: *"Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil."*

Mary says: *"He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*

While Mary's song does seem to be based on Hannah's song, the context in which each woman sings is quite different.

Hannah, an old woman, longed to get pregnant, to have a son. She was ridiculed by her husband's concubine because she was not able to have children. But faithful Hannah prayed fervently and her prayer was answered. After some time she did get pregnant. She had a son whom she dedicated to God. He of course grew up to be the prophet Samuel.

Mary, a young teenager, was not looking to get pregnant, at least the way we receive the story. She was awfully surprised to find out that she was going to have a baby. In Luke we are given a picture of Mary as a woman who makes a choice to enter into the mystery of God, to answer affirmatively when the angel comes to her. As Rosemary Radford Ruether notes:

*"When the angel arrives, Mary does not consult Joseph but makes her own decision. Luke sees this free choice as an expression of her faith."*

This choice of Mary to have a child in these mysterious circumstances is brave enough but she is also living in an occupied country where the prospects for a new baby can't have been all that good. And yet she says yes, choosing to believe and place her faith with hope and not fear.

Isaiah 61 also comes out of a situation of political uncertainty though the Jewish community at that point was living in exile not under occupation. Both Mary and

Isaiah praise God despite their respective political realities and trust that God can change the landscape in which they live.

Less familiar perhaps is the end of Isaiah 61, which has some resonance with the words of praise attributed to Mary in Luke 1. Lauren will read the verses from Isaiah; Jen from Luke.

*<sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,*

**"My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.**

*He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

**Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.**

*<sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,*

**<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.**

*So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

**<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."**

The lectionary places these two passages on the same day, though not intertwined like we just heard. With their similar views of the work of God, the ways in which they praise, are we make an inference that Mary was also a prophet, like Isaiah?

If we turn back a few verses to the beginning of chapter 61 we find the text that Jesus reads at the beginning of his ministry. He comes home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue for services. It is his turn to read and this happens to be the text for the day:

*The spirit of Our God is upon me, because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and release to those in prison; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of Our God's favor.*

It is from these verses from Isaiah that Jesus takes his signals for ministry and indeed proclaims himself as the anointed one referred to. The servant of God that is introduced in Isaiah is a very different kind of leader than the traditional warrior/politician that the world thinks of. Mary's song shows us that she is an integral part of this upside down way of doing things, with the poor being elevated and the hungry being filled, praising God despite political instability.

This week I spoke with Denise Brown about her experiences with Mary, growing up Catholic and now as a Mennonite, still practicing some of the Catholic spiritual disciplines. As we talked it became clear that many understand Mary as a quiet strong woman, someone who made the choice to be obedient, a woman of prayer who also encourages us to pray. She had a quiet self-confidence that allowed - and compelled her - to be a follower of her own son. Jesus on the other hand was more of a do-er. We know that he got away from the crowds and prayed, that was a necessary part of his life, but more of the stories we have of him are of his interactions with people, the traveling, healing, teaching, preaching. Together Mary and Jesus bring a kind of balanced spirituality, the being and doing that we all need to strive for.

But the song of Mary and the words of Isaiah are not only spiritual; they are political. Indisputably most of us here are the rich, the ones who are going to be overthrown, who are going to be sent away empty in this picture painted by little Mary, meek and mild. It is one thing to praise God when you are obviously rich. It is quite another thing to praise God when you are poor. And it is still another to praise God knowing you are going to be thrown down, and lose power.

Most of us here come from the occupying country, this country that has military bases in dozens of countries around the world. And there are many people in this country (and around the world) who feel as if they are in exile, aliens in a strange land. Given our context it is frightening, and overwhelming, to take this song of Mary seriously.

In our positions of global and personal power we have little choice but to see the singer. We must look at this young woman who has made this faithful choice to live into the mystery. We must look in her eyes and see the God that dwells within.

As we see again the poor, the young, women on the margins, those who live under occupation, those who make choices we may not understand, the words of Isaiah and Jesus still ring true. They are spoken to us:

*There is one who comes to proclaim liberty  
to those held captive - to money and addictions  
to power and violence.*

*There is one who comes to allow us to see again  
with new eyes the creation  
and the created people of God.*

*There is one that comes to release us  
from prisons of fear  
social obligations and  
wealth*

*It is this One that we look to,  
this One that we follow.*

*May we with Mary, be the followers of this Jesus  
and with him proclaim the year of Our God's favor.*



Waiting for the service to begin ...