

There's Something About Mary - Patty Friesen Dec. 14, 2014

Luke 1:39-45

This Third Sunday of Advent is finally Mary's Sunday, a gentle reprieve after the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist. But Mary is a prophet in her own right. Of all the women in scripture, we know the most about Mary's inner life, the ponderings of her heart and her outer life, the impact of her actions on human history. Mary first appears in the Gospel of Matthew in Matthew's long genealogy of the people of God. Mary appears along with other women: Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba, all foreign women with scandalous pregnancies. Mary fits right into the family tree of unlikely female candidates who have been chosen by God for the salvation of God's people. Matthew's intent of including these women is to remind the puritan Jewish community of their own questionable origins – that they may be humble and open to the work of God in new ways. In the same way, our own genealogies humbly remind us of the crooked branches in our family trees.

We glean from the gospels that Mary at a marriageable age to Joseph must be young, an adolescent. And she must be strong, for in today's scripture she hikes pregnant from Nazareth to where her cousin Elizabeth lives in the hill country. Mary is no pale-faced, blue-eyed passive blonde

with downcast eyes and a halo around her head as European art often depicts her. She is young, strong, dark-haired and dark-skinned, a Palestinian Jew who probably looks most like our aboriginal young women, and she can hike over mountains and ride a donkey for 50 miles in her ninth month. She is not passive, she is an active agent in this whole story and takes initiative throughout the gospels. She is not chosen because she is essentially pure or even because she is the perfect mother. She is chosen to bear Jesus because she says Yes to God despite her faults and reservations.

In Luke's gospel, Mary is the first person to receive God's grace. The angel Gabriel tells her, "You have found favour with God." God has looked upon her and loved her as she is in all her adolescent awkwardness and this outpouring of God's love makes her open to God's call on her life. The fact that she says Yes to carrying Jesus makes her the first disciple, the first follower to give her life over to his.

Mary ponders God's love and favour throughout her pregnancy. Indeed, Mary becomes a practiced ponderer the rest of her life. Whenever Jesus does something in the gospels Mary ponders it in her heart. She reflects on who Jesus is and what God is up to in the world. She alone knows who Jesus really is. This knowledge often creates tension between the two of them when she wants him to reveal who he is but Jesus is not

ready. Mary is a bit of a helicopter mother, hovering around Jesus, telling him to turn water into wine and to heal people.

But Mary knows Jesus is here to do God's work and she is the one most ready for God's kingdom to be revealed. She follows him throughout the entirety of his life, his ministry, teachings and healings, right to the cross. Mary is not afraid to be implicated with Jesus. She, more than anyone, could have imagined the possibility of a resurrection because she knows who Jesus really is. While the gospels do not name her presence at the resurrection, she is actively involved in the early church. Acts 1:14, "the disciples all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus."

Mary is a key disciple and leader for the early church. She is the eyewitness of Jesus' life from the beginning and no other disciple has that kind of history with him. From Matthew 1:16 to Acts 1:14, she is literally and literarily book ends to the story of Jesus. It is likely, because of her relationship with the disciples that they relied on her for the writing of the gospels. Who else knew anything about his birth and getting lost at the temple? Who else was present to hear her telling Jesus to turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana? It is John's gospel that reflects most theologically on who Jesus is and what is John's relationship to Mary? John

19:26 & 27, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, Woman here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, Here is your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.” What do we think they talked about in John’s home? It is powerful to think that Mary’s life long meditations and ponderings likely led to John’s writings and how we know about Jesus today. No wonder she was dearly loved by the disciples and became revered in the early church through their writings and artwork. Mary is great, not only because she gave birth to Jesus, but also because she was a believer and follower her whole life long.

Her discipleship and obedience and risk-taking should make Mary more palatable to Mennonites. Our Anabaptist ancestors threw her out during the Reformation along with the priests and incense and we haven’t really heard from her since. Our ancestors believed that the veneration of Mary had become idolatry and that we didn’t need her or the priests as intercessors and intermediaries to God, that we had direct access to God through our own prayers. We had lots of Catholics in my hometown in northern Alberta and I’ve always been curious about them and their Mary statues. But Grandma Roth always said scornfully, “they worship Mary – we don’t!” Yet, I believe there is something about Mary, something

theologically profound and even Anabaptist if we give her another look for what she might mean to us today.

Mary's faith-filled partnership with God is underscored in her prayer the Magnificat, the longest set of words placed on the lips of any woman in the whole New Testament. She is in the embrace of her cousin Elizabeth; Zechariah has been struck dumb; the house is now women's space and they fill it with a prophetic language of faith. Mary launches into divine praise. Her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour, for poor and common woman though she may be, the powerful, living, holy God is doing great things for her. Not for her only but for all the poor – bringing down the mighty from their thrones, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry with good things. She herself embodies what God has begun in the world, the liberation of all peoples.

Mary has become a beloved, accessible figure of faith for all people throughout the world. In modern day Nazareth, there is a beautiful modern Church of the Annunciation. It is round like a womb with a skylight that lets in strong light from above to a vessel-like center where a lamp burns night and day. Architecturally it tells the story of God's light descending into Mary's womb and creating light for eternity. Around the walls of the church are icons, paintings, sculptures and mosaics depicting Mary in the skin tones and traditional dress of Christians from around the world. There is a

Chinese Mary and an Inuit Mary and an African-American Mary. Believers throughout the world have made her in their own image to give them strength for whatever their lives and struggles may be. Mary represents each one of us. Mary is no different than any one of us. The fact is that God has found favour with each one of us. We may not been visited by angels but we have certainly have known the love of God from our families and our upbringing. Some may have experienced God's outpouring love during a traumatic time. Whatever our personal encounters with God have been, God wants all of us bear the presence and love of Jesus within.

Mary is a partner in hope in the company of all the graced women and men who have gone before us. May we be encouraged by her mothering of Jesus to bring him to birth in our own world. May we reclaim the power of her pondering the ways of God, for our own deeper relationship with the living God and stronger care for the world. Let's pray...God and Maker of all, to redeem the world you chose the most unsuspecting of women to mother your Son and by your choice gave new glory to human flesh and earthly parenting. With the joy that was Mary's, may our souls magnify the Lord, and our bodies be the means through which you continue the mighty work of salvation for which Christ came. Amen.