

Mary: Partner in Hope
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A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregational Church
Tucson, AZ

1 Samuel 2:1-10
Luke 1:26-36, 46-55

I can remember in the fifth grade when every one of us kids yearned for the day when we would be in the sixth grade. Because in the sixth grade not only did we become the big shots of the school, the senior members, but also we were given the responsibility of being a safety. As a safety you were no little kid anymore. You were somebody. From the time they issued you that bright florescent orange safety belt, you knew that you had arrived.

If you wore the belt up on your shoulders you were “on duty,” and all the other children now had to listen to you. Lives depended on it! If you wore your belt down around your hips, that meant you were “off duty,” but still a safety, deserving all the respect and admiration that comes with that title.

So when we were in the fifth grade, we were ready! And somewhere in that fifth grade year we began to walk a little taller and speak with more authority.

When we anticipate something, it changes us. Anticipation has power; we become different people.

Today we have read a passage from Scripture of the anticipation of hope of Mary of Nazareth. Mary is receptive to the promise of liberation and her part in it, and she accepts it in faith. At first she is fearful and not overly enthusiastic, but because of her faith she begins to look forward to God being in their lives and in the world as never before. A new reality has entered her life. God has touched her soul, and her heart now burned within her.

And this anticipation changed her. Mary moves from a state of wonder to one of being a wholehearted participant. Mary declares herself to be a “handmaid of the Lord” and says, “let it be to me according to your word.”

According to the writer of the gospel of Luke, the young woman is spiritual—she’s in touch with the heavenly world—in dialogue with angels. It turns out that Mary is pregnant. She is betrothed to Joseph, but the marriage to him has not yet been completed. He is not the biological father. Yet a vision begins to form within her, and she slowly anticipates a remarkable future in spite of her dire circumstance. She comes to see that the pregnancy is just a negative thing after all, but it is connected with a higher purpose. In verse 48, she sings that God has looked on her “humiliation” or her “lowliness” with favor and has “helped” her and the child.

New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Johnson, writes that in the Christian tradition there are two ways to relate to Mary.

The first way is to see *Mary as a patron*. In this model, God is like some king who sits high above on a throne. So high, in fact, that the only way to reach God is through important people who serve as intermediaries and intercessors, pleading our cause before God. Because God is so unapproachable, we need friends in high places, and Mary, being “the Mother of the Lord,” according to this view, is the most powerful intercessor of all. The saints, in this model, are like courtiers who are part of the inner circle and who have the king’s ear. The saints in heaven exist *between* God and those on earth.

Johnson says that this patron-client view of Mary and the saints developed later after the church had officially established under the influence of the civil patronage system of the Roman Empire. And it’s not surprising that the patron-client view of God and Mary would reflect the patron-client system of the empire.

The other, older model of earlier Christianity is to see *Mary as a partner*. In this view, Mary and the saints are situated not between God and those on earth, but *alongside* their brothers and sisters on earth. “The earlier way for the living to related to the dead saw them all as companions to one another,” writes Johnson.

And so, instead of offering prayers of petition, the main way we relate to the saints is to remember them in a way that energizes our hope. It would see Mary as a kindred spirit and a partner in hope.

Yet the tendency in the church has been to view Mary as a patron and not a partner, transferring divine qualities to her and making Mary superhuman. *This was a mistaken effort to make up for a deficient theology of God*. Early on, she was given “titles, shrines, iconography, and power of the great mother goddess of the Mediterranean world,” writes Johnson, “to compensate for an overly patriarchal theology of God.”

The deficient theology was this: God took on the characteristics of the emperor—violent, ruthless, powerful, male and distant.

When Mary became “divine” to make up for deficient theology of God, she also became the model of the ideal woman. Theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote:

...the image of a sublime and elevated Mary was integral to the oppression of women. She is enthroned above us. She is pure; we are filthy. She is desexualized: we have sexual needs and problems. We can never measure up to her and should therefore feel guilty and ashamed. (The Strength of the Weak)

Johnson says, “Let God have her own maternal face.” When we allow Mary simply to be herself, to be human, then we can see, in the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “not just Mary’s face but the face of every woman is created as an *imago Dei* (image of God).”

Let us, instead, be inspired by Mary, that *Jewish peasant woman of faith*, as a colleague and partner in hope. She was no mere vessel!

Look at Mary as a flesh and blood human being. Times were hard. She lived in a village that occupied by the Roman imperial army. The people struggled under the triple taxation of the Temple, Herod and Caesar. The rich became richer and the poor poorer. The religious institutions were hijacked by the powerful. There was widespread poverty and violence. People were desperate, frustrated, at the end of their rope. It was a powder keg ready to explode. Revolution was in the air.

And so it is in this context that Mary identifies with her Jewish tradition of the struggle against oppression. She connects with that prophetic faith that fights for justice. She is part of a long line of courageous women, such as Miriam, Deborah and Hannah, who all sing revolutionary songs of liberation and freedom. *Jesus was the son of a social activist!*

I like to say that Jesus was the son of the Joan Baez of her day. No wonder Jesus turned out the way he did!

We are partners in hope with Mary.

This is no ordinary hope. It is for a new age of justice and peace.

Mary sings of her expectation in what has come to be known as the Magnificat:

*God has put down the mighty from their throne,
and exalted those of low degree;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich God has sent empty away.*

The people would have cheered. Those in power would have been indignant and threatened. And Mary's revolutionary expectation for a new age and a new life can speak to our situation today. Kathleen Norris wrote:

The Magnificat's message is so subversive that for a period during the 1980's the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.

It is a subversive hope of new life for those men, women and children caught in the bloody violence in Central America where over 100,000 deaths occurred in the 1980's.

It still is a subversive hope
for full equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, not separate and unequal status.

It still is a subversive hope
for a humane and just immigration policy in this country, for we are all immigrants or descendant of them. At this time we say "give me your tired, your

poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore... except you!"

It still is a subversive hope

for fairness towards workers, not just for those "too big to fail," but for the millions of those "too small to be heard," those who have no jobs, no health care and who are living on the brink.

It still is a subversive hope!

But our hope and dreams are not always like the holy vision of Mary. In our striving we may become fixated or narrow-minded. Success and approval of others may so dominate our lives that it may become the only thing we anticipate. "If I can only achieve this job promotion, or this college degree or my retirement goals, then I will be happy. Or when I have enough money to purchase that new car or house, then my life will have meaning. Or if I find the perfect mate, maybe have children, then my life will be whole." Now these goals are not bad, but in isolation, by themselves, they are dead ends. Disconnected from the broader vision of justice of Mary and Jesus they can distract us.

We may not always share that holy vision with Mary, but she is not all that different from us, either. She was, after all, just a poor peasant girl from Nazareth, and unlikely person in an unlikely situation. We might find it more logical for God to act through some important priest in a large city or some great king or politician, not a poor pregnant woman from a small village.

Mary was like any of us, regular human beings. And like Mary, we can anticipate the presence of God in our lives. We can expect the "Power of the Most High" to "overshadow" us. We can look forward to the Spirit always coming to meet us in our lives, to breathe new life into us and our world. We, too, can hope to be move in crazy, unlikely and desperate situations.

God's word to Mary, to the world and to us is that we may have hope, that we may proclaim the coming of this hope against all odds, and that we may give birth to the coming of the presence of God amidst pain, suffering and injustice. And with this comes a sense of purpose that goes beyond all other goals and achievements and threatens the foundation of the world as it is.

The mystic, Meister Eckhart, said it so well: "What does it avail me that this birth [of God's Word] is always happening, if it does not happen to me?" In other words, like Mary, *may we give birth to the Word*. Like Mary, our prayer can also be, "Let it be to us according to your word, O God."

Let it be to us
to live lives of love and justice
with our fellow human beings.

Let it be to us
to work for a peaceful world.

Let it be to us

that there should be hunger no more.

Let it be to us

that we have new life of freedom
from our fears, from our past failures,
and from the chains of our aspirations.

Let is be to us

that we expect the miracle of justice, compassion and equality being born
in our lives.