

“Mary”

The Rev Drew Willard  
UCC@The Villages, FL  
December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010

I Sam. 2:1-10

Luke 1:46-55

‘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,

to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.’

I Sam. 2:7-8a

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the strong women of a long time ago

who serve as examples for all of us even now –

especially, Mary the mother of your son our Lord Jesus.

Amen

At Lancaster Theo. Seminary of the UCC,

we had a Roman Catholic priest as our instructor

for spiritual direction, a Jesuit named Father Ed Sanders.

And in response to my early interest in storytelling,

he said to me,

“Be aware of the stories that come to you to tell.”

There are two stories that I have told many times over the years;

Just a couple weeks ago you heard my version of

‘The Magic Folgers Coffeecan’ which – if you could fill it,  
you would be the happiest person in the whole world –

except that it has no bottom to it;

and another story I told here earlier this summer was about

a wounded king who is healed by the Holy Grail.

Both stories involve ‘vessels’ of grace with the Holy Grail being more

familiar to us because of popular entertainment and

religious speculation about the legend that

Mary Magdalene had been the wife of Christ

and gave birth to a child.

So, the Holy Grail in this sense is an earthen vessel for divine grace.

But that metaphor or parable already exists in Christian tradition

in the example of Mary the mother of Christ.

According to the Gospel of Luke, she literally conceived and gave birth  
to the Son of God.

Mary represents Creation and Jesus Christ represents  
accessibility of God.

Willard, p.2

In the Biblical narrative,

Mary was confronted by an angel who said that  
she would bear a child for God –  
and in the Greek Orthodox tradition, she doesn't just acquiesce,  
but chooses to be part of God's plan.

And choice is a sign of mutual respect,

the basis for a loving relationship;

and so, she become the 'Theotokos' – the 'God-Bearer'.

She also represents all of humanity –

the potential we all have to become someone

who receives the love of God into their lives

so as to share that with others like a cup of fellowship.

Now, 'Mary' is a tricky topic for Protestant ministers  
to preach about.

There is that lingering concern about too much emphasis

placed on the role of Mary which could lead to idolatry –  
or 'Mariolatry';

Yet she is very much a part of our inherited traditions

as Protestants, as well as the traditions of Islam –

and even Judaism could claim Mary in some ways.

The name Mary is a form of Miriam

and the first Miriam was Moses' sister

who watched over him as an infant, set afloat on the waters

to escape death from Pharaoh's servants, and

as an adult she sang in celebration of the Hebrews' escape

from Egypt after crossing the Red Sea.

The name 'Miriam' itself is derived from the word 'Mara' –

which means 'Bitterness'.

And the Jewish people are well-acquainted with bitterness.

Mary as the mother of Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person,

a Jewish woman who was observant of her faith.

Although Jesus' words and deeds have been a problem for Judaism,

Mary is actually someone Jewish people could identify with –

a Jew who remained faithful

even though tragedy touched her life by the death of her son.

Willard, p.3

With regard to Islam, Mary is the only woman named in the Qur'an  
and there's a whole chapter named after her which tells the story  
of the angel who announces she will have a son,  
followed by the account of the virgin birth –  
though Muslims don't interpret this as proof of  
Jesus as the Son of God;

There are also two miracle stories in which  
food is provided to Mary when she is in need;  
And there are numerous references to her  
as a faithful and devout person who regularly  
practices prayer & fasting.

She is one of the most respected women in the Islamic tradition  
and I have heard it said that the origin of  
the headscarf worn by Muslim women  
is in imitation of Mary.

We get a glimpse of her faith in, hope for, and love of God  
in the prayer-song attributed to her called 'The Magnificat'.

In Mary's song of praise and thanksgiving,  
we hear not only of her adoration  
for the miracle God is about to do in giving her a son,  
but also for God's commitment to justice –  
to care for the 'least of these'.

It is a song of triumph like that of her namesake Miriam at the Exodus,  
'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.' Ex. 15:21b

And it is a song of vindication that echoes Hannah's song  
of long ago – and the promise of liberation.

The liberation of God that comes to us through Christ  
happens at a personal level and as a community –  
Mary's song is our song when we say 'Yes'  
to God's purpose to be at work in our lives.

Mary as the mother of Jesus made the great mission of  
Christ's life, death, and resurrection possible  
because of her cooperation with God's intention.

She models what we all could be,  
and yet – like Christ, she is unique.

Willard, p.4

For Protestants she is our example as human beings  
to become vessels of God's good news of compassion and justice.

For Catholic and Orthodox Christians,

she is also the Queen of Heaven who plays an intercessory role –  
and I am told it works something like this:

Do you go to Dad first for what you want? Isn't it really Mom?

You go to Mom to get things done.

Joking aside,

Mary reminds us that Christianity is not just  
about the brutal imagery of Crucifixion,  
but also the nurturing vision of new life  
represented as a mother with child.

She is that strong Jewish woman of long ago  
who suffered loss, but remained faithful.

She is a woman respected by Muslims for her perfect devotion to God  
through prayer and fasting.

She is the 'God-Bearer' that we as Christians  
can – and should follow as our example  
to bring peace on Earth, good will to all.

Amen

*The Jewish Testament lesson today is from First Samuel 2:1-10  
and is called 'Hannah's Song'.*

*It is both a personal prayer by Hannah, giving thanks  
for the birth of her son, Samuel,  
and a prayer of her faith community,  
praising God's power and moral accountability  
for the sake of humankind.*

2:1 Hannah prayed and said,

'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.

My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my victory.

2 'There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.

3 Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.

4 The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.

5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.

6 The Lord kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.

8 He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honour.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,  
and on them he has set the world.

9 'He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might does one prevail.

10 The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
the Most High will thunder in heaven.'

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has looked with favour

on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise

he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’