

Seeing Mary Again

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on December 12, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV)

We've now reached the *third* Sunday of Advent, and so, two sermons are behind us in this season. We have heard Jesus' warning to open our eyes, to be ready for signs of the Kingdom, and we have heard John the Baptist's call to repentance, that we might truly hear and see the Advent message in a new, unexpected light ... that we might, as I like to say, "see again as for the first time."

Today in our gospel text, we are introduced to the young Mary, soon to be the mother of Jesus. If ever there was a biblical figure more clouded in mystery and misunderstanding ... if ever we need to "see again for the first time," it is today.

This truth first occurred to me several years ago after Lisa and I had honeymooned in Italy. We had gone to Rome and on to Vatican City, to St Peter's Basilica. As you enter the basilica, you might be encouraged to look to your right – for on the right, in a small chapel, is one of the world's most famous works of Renaissance art, a sculpture chiseled out by the great Michelangelo: *The Pieta*. It depicts a mournful Mary, cradling the dead body of her crucified son.

It's stunningly beautiful, *powerful*. Its place in the history of art is richly deserved. But here's the thing: *You can't get very close to it*. You can approach it, but only so far. For you see, the *Pieta* lies behind a clear, bulletproof shield – a security measure after someone attacked the statue with a hammer over 40 years ago.

Later, sometime after our honeymoon trip, I remembered that tour and that great work, and was thinking about the biblical Mary for a study I was working on. It dawned on me that just as

a barrier had been placed between that sculpture and those who would get close to it, so centuries of tradition had erected a barrier around the biblical Mary, shielding us from an encounter with a real, flesh and blood person and offering up something else instead.

When we think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, we are likely to imagine her in one of a few different ways. We may see –

- a sweet, meek, docile girl who could never have had much to say for herself. Just think of all those nativity scene Christmas cards, with young Mary in a blue veil, with the slouching posture, the downcast eyes, the halo, the insecure demeanor, the vacant look. Words like "handmaiden," "submissive," "obedient" may come to mind.
- Or the quiet, serene, nurturing young mother, with the baby Jesus in her lap, of so much medieval Christian iconography.
- Or the spotless, sinless, perpetually virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven and Mother of God ... so far above us mere mortals.

These familiar images all have their own staying power, in a way perhaps even their own beauty. But it *is* fair to ask how they help us – or how they *hinder* us, how they might stand as barriers, keeping us from getting too close and seeing the *real person* that Mary was, and learning what she has to teach us.

In our gospel passage for today, we are told that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to the backcountry, to the sticks, to a little town called Nazareth ... a *nowhere* place ... far away from any center of power or influence ... the last place anyone might imagine an *angel* to go!

But then, in Nazareth there's a young teenage girl named Mary, engaged to a man named Joseph, who could claim his descent (who knew?!) – way, way back – from the legendary king David. I stress *way, way back* to point out that this Joseph was far, far removed from the royal life of his distant ancestor. There was nothing legendary about *his* life, in *this* place. *His* life was one of hardship, with little reason to hope for anything different. He's not even at the center of *this* story!

No, it's the *teenage girl* the angel has come to see: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." It goes without saying that Mary has no idea what's going on. She's never been "favored" a day in her life, and now, to hear it from an angel!

And boy, does she hear it ... told that she, though as yet unmarried, will soon conceive and bear a son who will be called the Son of the Most High and reign as King forever! I don't know how anyone could hear that and not wonder if they're dreaming – or question their own sanity – but Mary's response is one of *wonder* and *curiosity*, not self-doubt.

Moreover, she is told that she is not the only one to be visited: Her relative Elizabeth in old age has conceived a son and is six-months along already! Nothing, it seems, is impossible with God! Strange things are afoot. The Spirit of God is alive and well and at work! A new day is dawning, and Mary is right at the center of it.

And here, for me, is the most astonishing part: Mary doesn't indulge in self-doubt, or argue, or beg, like Moses ... she doesn't run away, like Jonah. Somehow, this obscure teenage girl, this strong, brave young woman, is ready, as if she has been waiting all her life for just this moment, to say YES to her part in God's story ... "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Do you think she knew what would happen, how it would all unfold? Many of you have heard a popular Christian song called "Mary, Did You Know?":

*Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you?*

Did she know? In a way, in part, of course she did. The angel told her, gave her a heads up, but I suppose there are some things you're just not going to understand until they happen. The point is, she didn't *have* to know ... she knew that *God* was driving this story, and that was good enough for her.

At the end of the day, that's the most basic lesson of this season. These Advent stories are filled with waiting people, like Mary, and Elizabeth, and later, Simeon, and Anna. They lived in patient expectation, and because of this, were ready for the Good News when it arrived.

As columnist Michael Gerson has written, "Their hope did not come as the result of a battle. It came like a seed planted in the ground. Like the sun rising in defiance of night. Like a child growing within his mother."

And this patience, this waiting, this trust in a God of love and justice will give her the strength to live out her calling, in all its joy and pain. In this strength, she will endure the poverty of the Bethlehem birth, the squalor of the stable, but empowered by the Spirit, she will persist in hope, unfailingly, for the time when God turns the world around. In the face of many troubles, hers is a *raw* faith, testifying to the radical, unpredictable, and yet ultimate *triumph* of the gospel.

Of course, Mary's *troubles* had only just begun. Shortly after the birth of Jesus, a dream propelled Mary and Joseph with their child to escape a ruler's jealous madness. In the flight from Herod, Mary would know what happens when corrupt power is threatened. She would understand the mindset that drives tyrants to acts of terror, even aimed at innocent children.

They would flee, suffering the anguish of knowing that other infants and their parents would not be as fortunate. Grief, and sometimes guilt, are often the close companions of survivors, and there is no reason to suspect that Mary was spared anything less than heartbreak over this tragedy. As the wise old Simeon foresaw, a sword would pierce her own soul too.

And this scriptural foreshadowing of Mary's pain as she will one day watch her son die, makes me think back to that day at St Peter's when I saw the raw grief of the *Pieta* as captured so brilliantly by Michelangelo. As art so often does, *it tells the truth*: Mary's soul is pierced, her heart broken. Jesus is dead, his cause an apparent failure, and his mother, who was once able to save her son by fleeing to Egypt, is powerless to save him now. The sculpture conveys this densely packed human moment – it calls us to stop, to care, to wonder. She has lost a son. To all appearances, they have lost their cause. It is finished.

Yet, in the midst of this deepest pain and sorrow, the *Pieta's* Mary insists on communion and intimacy rather than escape. She does not veil her own pain from our eyes, nor does she camouflage the circumstances of the execution. Jesus lies sprawled across her lap, and with her arms outstretched, Mary offers him to us all.

In the end, this may well be the *Pieta's* strongest and most enduring insight for us. Mary's most important struggle on behalf of God's call may be her refusal to allow death to have the final word. Mary stands steadfast and resolute, picking up the cause for which her son was killed, for she made it known early, in this morning's gospel text, through her courage and trust, that she would not be bullied by the powers that be.

Seeing Mary in this revealing light, "as for the first time," gives us a way of appreciating anew, and in a deeper way, all those *traditional* images, enshrined in church tradition –

Yes, Mary *was* humble and meek, but she was anything but docile and weak, for her radical openness to a God of love and justice made her strong!

Yes, Mary *was* at one time the watchful, nurturing young mother with the infant Jesus in her lap ... but that watchful nurture was surely also a fierceness to *guard* her son and convey to him her own passion and hope for God's dream.

And yes, while we Protestants can't affirm any quasi-divinity for Mary, we *can* – and should – embrace the Mary of the hauntingly beautiful "Ave Maria," Franz Schubert's musical interpretation of the traditional Catholic prayer, the Hail Mary: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen."

You may recognize its first phrases as coming directly from Luke's gospel. It ends by asking Mary to intercede for us, to pray for us. For those of us who are not Catholic, that probably sounds strange. It's true that we ask others to pray for us all the time, but then, we tend to ask those saints who are with us *here, now*. I would imagine that the saints above are otherwise

engaged, but if one *could* intercede for us, why *not* Mary? Strong, faithful Mary ... Mary, whose soul was pierced ... Mary, who was alive in the face of heartbreak ... Mary, who wept, who laughed, who trusted, and who chose life every inch of the way.

To the glory of God! Amen.