

“PONDERING MARY”
2 Samuel 7:1 - 11; Luke 1:26 - 38
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The great cathedral at Chartres, an hour outside of Paris, was begun in the 11th century. It is massive, beautiful, and like most ancient cathedrals, it claims holy relics that date from the time of Jesus. The most sacred relic of Chartres is a length of simple, homespun cloth woven in the early first century; the claim that is made is that it is the gown worn by Mary when she gave birth to the Christ.

Now, I know that different people have different reactions to relics. Some accept them unquestioning and are filled with awe. Others are forever dubious; they can't get past disbelief. For me, when I look at relics, especially one like this - simple cloth of the time - it stirs my imagination. Mary might have worn this. If she didn't wear this, she wore something very much like it. And all of the sudden, Bibleland Mary becomes for me a flesh and blood woman who wears clothes of a certain kind of cloth. She has substance and particularity, and I am drawn to ponder this woman who wore clothes, and made dinner for her family: the woman who - with Joseph - birthed the Christ and alone stood weeping at the foot of a cross.

Now I know we Protestants aren't supposed to ponder Mary. Ever since Martin Luther called the popular devotion to Mary in his day idolatrous, a distraction from the Trinity, we Reformed church types have cast Mary aside. But, to be honest, I can't remember a time when I wasn't drawn to her. My parents collected madonnas from around the world as folk art. My father, of good Jewish stock, was a pediatrician and loved the Madonna and child image. So I grew up away from the typical Protestant disdain for the Blessed Mother. In fact, one of the things that sold me on this church when I first came here to interview was the beautiful Madonna and child statue carved by Jack Whitney that used to be in the old chapel and now is installed in the new one. It's a rare sight in a Congregational church, and, for me, a welcome one. Mary is one of the great theological figures of the Bible, and to follow her story in this season, like we followed Joseph's last week, is important. To look at Mary and Joseph side by side - these two teenagers who bore the Christ - to look at the two of them together is to see the reach of faith that bridges the distance between human and divine.

“In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a young woman betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house and lineage of David, and the young woman's name was Mary.” So begin the familiar words of Luke's story. Mary hears the angel, and she is told that if she consents, she will bear a son who will be holy, who will be Son of God.

Mary's situation, her circumstance around the birth, is so different from Joseph's. Joseph - if you remember from last Sunday - Joseph stands as the image of pure faith, of the leap of will, the decision of the heart that chooses to say “yes” to God's foolish ways over and against the wisdom of the world. A challenge of faith for us all. But it is not the only challenge of faith. While Joseph's faith springing from his circumstance is pure, spiritual, inward - it's all about the

choosing, and then holding fast in what is chosen - the figure of Mary, in contrast, is in the most personal and concrete way possible, a testimony to faith embodied, faith that is active, moving, growing, birthing. Mary, literally, in her "yes" to God, gives flesh to the divine. She is all about action, about using her very human body in the service of God's purposes.

Mary is no casual vessel. She understands what it means that she will bear this child. Later in the story, she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and there pours out the great hymn of faith we call "the magnificat." Her words treasure the coming of God's chosen One as powerfully as her body. She articulates the radical vision of God's kingdom that is being born: the kingdom of God, where the poor are filled up and those who have exploited the poor are toppled; the kingdom of God, where those of low estate are valued, and "the proud are scattered" - I love this line - "in the imagination of their hearts." The kingdom of God, where a poor nothing girl from nowhere can do great things: can, in fact, bear the Christ.

It is the world turned upside down, by the action of God on one level, but by God acting deliberately, intentionally with humankind - not necessarily important humankind, not kings and generals, and CEO's of multi-national corporations - and not perfect humankind, not saints and visionaries. The annunciation to Mary speaks of the consent, the willingness of God to work with and through ordinary people; and it speaks as well of the willingness and capability of ordinary people - generation after generation - to give flesh to God's Word, to make the reign of the Messiah real, to act it out in ways small and large, so that still in our midst, Christ might dwell among us.

We liberal church people, if we cast Mary aside as of no importance, we will have squandered a significant piece of our birthright. Mary is the image of radically embodied faith, faith in action, giving all that it has and all that it is to serve God's ends. Her faithfulness is a challenge to each and every Christian of every generation to dare to believe we can act significantly for God, to give God our bodies: our hands, our feet, our arms to hold, our backs to carry the burdens of the vulnerable. Mary challenges us to push the boundaries of what we would do - and what we believe we can do - that the Word might again become flesh and dwell among us.

This is the last Sunday in Advent. Soon now, in the still of the night, a child will draw his first breath in a rude stable on the side of a windswept hill. Small, fragile, needy, he will lie in a manger, the very image of vulnerability. But we need not fear for him. For behind him, beside him stand Joseph and Mary, the chosen ones of God for this task. And this year, like every year, they invite us to stand beside them. We can take our place by Joseph, and bend our faithful hearts, like his, to embrace God's profound foolishness. Or we can move closer to Mary who, with everything she was, acted to give birth to God's new day. Wherever we find our place, we are asked to believe that the story is not over yet. It is our turn to tend the child. What gifts have you to bring to his glorious birth? Thanks be to God. Amen.