

## **“AND ALL FLESH SHALL SEE IT TOGETHER?”**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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“And Mary said to the angel, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.’” Braver words were never spoken, words that have echoed through 2000 years of history, interpreted by a variety of audiences to serve a variety of wants, desires, needs. Mary, the mother of Jesus: in the official theology of the Roman Catholic church, the mother, the sister, the Bride of Christ, forever virgin, forever obedient to God’s will. Mary the mother of Jesus: in the theology of the folk culture of the Catholic church: the compassionate one, the intercessor for the poor and marginalized, forever accessible, forever loving, forever present in the face of suffering. Mary the mother of Jesus: in the theology of the progressive church: well, . . . we just don’t know what to do with Mary, so we have set her aside. The story of the virgin birth is a miracle story, and we progressives, we are, most of us, uncomfortable with miracles. Are we supposed to take them as fact: that God sometimes acts directly in the world in a way that stands reality as we know it on its head? Or are we supposed to see them as symbolic, and if so, what do they symbolize? And what if we’re wrong? This virgin birth thing with Mary—better to just ignore it, and focus on a romantic view of a warm cozy stable and a message of Peace on Earth and Good Will to all. At least, that we can understand, or so we think. At least that is right up our theological alley.

But, as most of you already know, I am a Mary fan. Other than Jesus, she is the biblical personage I have spent the most time considering, pondering, and, yes, finally loving. Moreover, I believe that Mary should be revered in the progressive church movement. We should take her as our standard bearer. And I say that because it is Mary’s face I see, Mary’s presence that warms me, in a lot of places we Christian progressives hold close to our hearts.

Some examples. When I was in Washington D.C. week before last, I went to see the new MLK memorial. The site is impressive: a larger than life, full-length bas relief sculpture of King which is one of three parts of a single boulder cut apart, with the inscription, “Out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” Surrounding that central element is a semi-circular array of King quotations from the entire span of his too-brief life. As I stood in the midst of this monument to hope, to the possibility of what the work of brave souls can accomplish, I thought of some of the words of King’s most famous address, his “I have a dream” speech. From King: “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

“I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as brothers and sisters.

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

When I think of the content of that speech, I can not help but compare it to Mary’s Magnificat, where she proclaims the good news of God’s mercy and grace: that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, that God has filled the hungry with good things and sent those of privilege empty away.

Both King and Mary speak of a reality that they have never seen, a reality that their “station” in life should keep them from even imagining, much less dreaming or proclaiming. To see what we have never seen. To imagine the unimaginable. But I can see them there together, Mary and Dr. King: partners in believing that the glory of God can not forever be held back, that through the combination of human commitment and God’s grace, it shall be revealed, and all flesh shall truly see it together.

I have another image of Mary: Mary after her time with Elizabeth, walking back into Nazareth, her pregnant belly preceding her. As people see her, they are whispering and pointing, thinking to themselves or calling out aloud that she is immoral, unnatural, a whore, a fallen woman, a sinner worthy to be stoned for her sins. And on she walks, head held high, eyes forward, unashamed, beloved of God. And I think I every Gay Pride march I have ever participated in. And there at the front, I see her: pregnant Mary with a Drag Queen to one side, Dykes on Bikes on the other, and hopefully a United Church of Christ delegation with a rainbow banner proudly held aloft behind. I see her there, by her open bravery insisting on the dignity and diversity of human love as given and blessed by God, proclaiming by her shamelessness that we are the straight/gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/queer community, all of us together, all of us blessed by the divine, and all of us reflecting God’s transforming love .

One more example. I’ve told you this story before. When a member of our church was in the old Sacred Heart hospital in Eugene, for three days running, I stopped in the chapel as I was leaving, a chapel graced with a particularly lovely statue of Mary, arms open in love and compassion. Each of those days, I ran into a middle-aged Hispanic man sitting in one of the chairs, his eyes closed in prayer or open in contemplation of the Mary statue. This last day, he got up as I was leaving, and I asked him what brought him to the hospital. He told me that he was there visiting his son who was dying of cancer upstairs. “Every day,” he told me, “I come here to spend some time with Our Lady, because she knows what it is to have a son die too young.” I think of Mary later in her life, standing at the foot of the cross, steadfast when all others have deserted her Jesus. Mary, the compassionate one, Mary of the loving heart, the sacred heart: her arms outstretched to all in need, to all who want for consolation, to all who are lonely or in despair. I see her in the refugee camps in Darfur, in hospitals and hospices around the globe, at the bedsides or chair-sides of those who weep. I see her there in every haunt of misery or need—love stronger than fear, love stronger than pain, love that will never turn away.

And I wonder again why we progressive Christians have not embraced Mary as example and inspiration. You know, in the days of the Roman Empire, in the time when Jesus was born, the line between human and divine was seen not as either/or, but as a continuum. So to deal with our

squeamishness about the Virgin birth, I find myself wondering if the line between the miraculous and human invention is also a continuum. If Mary had not said yes—“here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word,” then all God’s desiring would have come to nothing. Mary teaches us, reminds us that we, miracle in itself, are partners with God in the work of salvation. Peace on Earth; Good will to all people: it too will not come about just for God’s desiring. For peace and justice to come, it will take our bravery, our love, our compassion, our willingness to say: Here we are. The servants of the lord: and we will work, and we will struggle, and we will partner, and we will march, and sing, and join hands together with all who dare to dream, all who dare to imagine a world never seen. And God will be with us. And then, then, the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and miracles will happen, and all flesh will see it together. The Word of our God has spoken this. Thanks be to God. Amen.