

Characters at the Crèche: Mary – The Favored One

Luke 1:26-56

First Sunday in Advent/2nd December 2007

On a hillside outside the old, ancient city of Ephesus (Turkey), there sits a very small house that was, according to tradition, the home of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is where she lived after Jesus' resurrection, brought there by John, who is buried in Ephesus. I had occasion to visit there with a group from the Ecumenical Institute, mostly Roman Catholics. Not surprisingly, visiting that site was a highlight of the experience for many. For centuries it has been a pilgrimage site. In the tiny narthex hanging on the walls and even from the ceiling are crutches, wheelchairs, plastic limbs (arms and legs), other mementos of the healings that have taken place there, attributed to the power of Mary. It was a mysterious, solemn, and peaceful place; but there was also something about it that I could not fathom, could not connect to as a Protestant, a sensibility that didn't make any sense to me. How does a Protestant approach Mary?

Tradition has it that John is buried in Ephesus. But did Mary die there? We don't know. According to the Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches, Mary was bodily assumed into heaven and never died. If the producers of the Discovery Channel documentary of *The Jesus Tomb* released last winter is true, then Mary is buried (along with Jesus) in Jerusalem. On Friday evening, Mark Croatti, friend of this congregation, invited me to his class at the Naval Academy and give my take on the tomb. I don't think Mary is buried there. Most scholars discount the documentary and the significance of the find. But it speaks to this fascination we have with the Holy Family, especially since *The DaVinci Code*. What if Mary is buried there or we find her ossuary in Nazareth (archeologists are discovering new things all the time) what then? What difference would it make?

It probably wouldn't faze us. Protestants have been very ambivalent when it comes to Mary's role in Jesus' birth. Martin Luther (1483-1546) speaks for many when he preached in a Christmas sermon, "...the text does not proclaim the honor of the mother, ...I am to accept the child and his birth and forget the mother, as far as this is possible, although her part cannot be forgotten, for where there is a birth there must be a mother." I wonder what Martin would have said if his mother was sitting in the pews that Christmas morning! "Nevertheless, we dare not put our faith," he said, "in the mother but only in the fact that the child was born."¹ Forget the mother? How exactly

¹ Martin Luther in John D. Witvliet and David Vroege, ed. *Proclaiming the Christmas Gospel: Ancient Sermons and Hymns for Contemporary Christian Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 109.

do we do this? If you read the rest of the sermon, you see that Luther is struggling here, he can't completely forget Mary. True, the focus is upon Jesus, but what about Mary? Is she merely a means to an end?

Presbyterian writer, Kathleen Norris says in her home growing up, "We dragged Mary out at Christmas, ...and...packed her safely in the crèche box for the rest of the year. We...denied [her] place in Christian tradition and were disdainful of the reverence displayed for her, so public and emotional, by Catholics."² Beverly Gaventa, a Presbyterian elder and professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, was featured prominently in a *Time* magazine article two years ago on the growing fascination with and interest in Mary among Protestants. Gaventa echoes Norris in saying, "Protestants have traditionally brought Mary out with the crèche and put her away with the Christmas wrappings."³ We don't talk about Mary, she said, because that's what Catholics do and so in reaction to Marian devotion and what might be called Mariolatry, the actual worship of Mary, which developed during the Middle Ages, we tend to be silent about her. In 1568, Pope Pius V (1504-1572) officially added this line to the Hail Mary prayer, "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death" and it seems we Protestants have been squeamish ever since – and for good theological, biblical reasons.

Luther could affirm "Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, [and] prepared broth...for God."⁴ But she is not an intercessor. Neither is she to be worshipped – honored, respected, admired, but not worshipped. We don't elevate anyone over Jesus.

So how do we admire her, honor her as Protestants? I learned recently that the Koran has more references to Mary than the New Testament does. She's honored and respected there. We Protestants need to reclaim the fact that she is important – *primarily because she shows us what it looks like to be receptive to God's will for our lives*. She is a role model. That's why Luke talks about her so much in his gospel. In Luke's gospel, the annunciation is given to Mary; in Matthew's gospel, Joseph receives the annunciation, Joseph is featured. Mary never says a word. So why this emphasis upon Mary in Luke? What is Luke trying to say to us?

² Kathleen Norris, *Time*, March 13, 2005.

³ In an interview with Beverly Gaventa, *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*.

www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week816/interview.html See also Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) and with Cynthia L. Rigby, *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

⁴ Cited in the *Time* article.

What does the text say? Up to this point in the gospel, we know absolutely nothing about Mary, apart from her name. No credentials. No history. There's absolutely nothing virtuous, religious, or special about her. She is a poor, powerless, teenager, betrothed virgin, who would have been otherwise nameless to history. She's no one in particular.

But then from out of nowhere – or everywhere – Gabriel arrives (uninvited) and addresses her: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Now, Latin translations of this text, called the Vulgate, have the angel saying, “Full of grace,” instead of favored one, as if to imply that she was somehow good enough, possessing enough grace warranting such a greeting and call from God, as if she has greater status over others. This is the foundation for Marian devotion. But that's not in the text. It's a formal greeting stating she is the recipient of grace, not something she earned.⁵ It's almost as if the angel arrives, addresses her as a child of grace, but she doesn't seem to even recognize herself in the call. The greeting confused her, “she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Then the angel assures her not to fear.

Mary is chosen by God's initiative, by God's call, by God's grace. And she is not the person one would expect God to use to bring about the redemption of the world. *That's because God's graceful way is always startling and surprising, paradoxical, and reversing every human expectation. It's never what we expect.* That's what Luke wants us to see. The ordinary can be filled with grace. This means we need to be open – open minded, open hearted, with open spirits, people who can completely trust the foolishness of it all when God sends us messages and calls us to do the impossible. Without this openness, Mary could have said, “No, no way. Not me,” thus hindering the work of God. If you think about it, that's how we continue to hinder the work of God. “No way. Not me.”

But she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” This is also what Luke wants us to see – this is how to be a *disciple*, a follower of Jesus, a servant of God. Bev Gaventa prefers to see Mary as the leading disciple, the first of the disciples. She was the first to say, “Yes.”

Mary's unwavering, “Yes,” provided a critical role in God's mission to redeem the world. In this way Mary was literally *Theotokos*, the *Godbearer*. This is how the Eastern Church sees Mary. In fact at the Council of Ephesus in 431, long before the rise of Marian devotion within Catholicism, this is precisely the title the early church gave to Mary: *Theotokos* – the *Godbearer*, the one who gives birth to God.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 38-39.

There was and can only be, of course, one Mary, the Mother of God. But I also think Luke wants us to see that there's a little bit of Mary in all of us, in both women and men. We are not asked literally to bring Christ into the world as she did. But are we not filled with grace? When we receive this grace – that is, recognize *ourselves* in the call, “Greetings, favored one!” that is, when we recognize ourselves as the object of God’s address, “Greetings, favored one” – do we not desire to be servants of that grace?

Aren't we also called to be servants of the Lord?

Aren't we also in some sense *Godbearers*,

who help to give birth to the presence of God in this world,

“people through whom God may enter the world again and again?”⁶

Aren't we called to give birth to God's hope among us,

to welcome the coming of our redemption?

Are we not also called to do the impossible, to *bear, to carry* the impossible,

to bear, to carry signs of new life and hope with our lives to the world?

So then what is God calling *you* to bear this Advent? What is God birthing in you, through you? As we approach the Table of the Lord, let us think and pray and consider. What will be your reply? Yes? Or, no way?

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⁶ Keanda Creasy Dean, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 17-18.