

Feast of Mary, Mother of Jesus
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
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If you're anything like me, you probably have a healthy number of questions. I wonder things like: Why didn't Trump use a better word than "wherever" to describe the blood coming out of Megyn Kelly? Or why do I have to pay Hulu to watch commercials? And I've often wondered, "Why should I care about Mary, the mother of Jesus?" After all, as a Lutheran Mary has not played anything more than a passive role in my life. So when I went to a Roman Catholic high school I would ask a lot of questions about her. I'd talk with my teachers about their answers, especially since most dogma about Mary was codified quite recently and isn't explicitly supported Biblically.

A great example of this is the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. We read in Mark and Matthew that Jesus had siblings¹, so doesn't that speak against Mary's life-long virginity? Well, some argue that the "siblings" are Jesus' cousins. Others argue that the doctrine of perpetual virginity is the "myth of a woman without a vagina." These scholars go on to say that Mary is honored because she is sexless and subordinate to a masculine God, and that ultimately both of those ideologies have been created and used to oppress and thus harm women for centuries.²

There's more Roman Catholic dogma about Mary that's questionable in my mind beyond her virginity - what about her sinless birth, otherwise known as the Immaculate Conception. Which, that's right, the Immaculate Conception is about Mary not Jesus. Does anyone have any idea when that was codified? Not until 1854. Or how about Mary's bodily assumption into heaven, or, in other words, when she was just taken up without having to die. Any idea what year that was codified? Well, it was 1950.³ Yeah, super recently for a lot of these dogmas.

In high school I would also get frustrated by the prayers to Mary, and I'd argue with my teachers that we can honor Mary but shouldn't waste our time praying to her like we're worshiping her. And so as a high school student I would ask, "why should I care about Mary?" And now as a pastor in a Lutheran congregation where we've chosen to have an icon of Mary adorn our space each week. The question still remains: "Why should I care about Mary?"

Well, I've got many reasons why I argue that we should reclaim our veneration of Mary,

¹ See Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55-56.

² Goss, Robert E. *The Queer Bible Commentary*. "Luke".

³ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20061218JJ.shtml>

and for time sake (and maybe your sake) I won't go into all them today. How about just a couple.

First, she is one of a handful of overlooked feminine examples of faith in the scriptures. Folks often think of men as the strong biblical characters – for example we think of Moses, Peter who is “the Rock”, and even Paul. Yet rarely do we ponder folks like Miriam, Ruth, and Sarah. When we look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, we can see a model of bold and tender love. We find that Mary receives the announcement from the angel Gabriel and is commissioned by God to bear a child. Mary trusts God, and when she eventually visits Elizabeth in today's reading she sings of her experience. Her song starts personally and continues cosmically and inter-generationally. She sings of our social order being overturned, she gives witness to the ways God lifts up those with heavy burdens, and she tells of how God empowers folks. She ultimately connects her individual experience to a cosmic understanding of God. With her song she acknowledges that now she too is included in God's history of redemption.

And today in during Jeannie's baptism we made personal, global, and cosmic connections as well. Right there on the top of page 2 we professed our faith where we renounced sin cosmically, globally, and personally. When we made confession about God we did so in a cosmic, global, and personal level too, as we focused on the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In baptism we, like Mary, are included in God's history of redemption. On this day we emulate the faith of Mary.

Mary's faithful example also shows us how God reverses the ways of the world. To understand that fully we must remember that Mary is probably a 13-year-old girl. She's poor. And to be pregnant without a husband was shameful. However, today we have a strong Mary who sings of God's mighty actions. We have Mary who turns that shame upside-down as she remembers what the angel Gabriel reminded her. For the angel said that the Lord is with her. She's reminded that though shame surrounds her she is loved, she is a participant in God's mighty action, and that God will work good news through what seems like a bastard child from an unwed mother. Mary's faithful example is one that reminds us of God's ceaseless life-giving love and empowerment.

So too in our lives this world will shame us. Far too often the church has been a source that shames and persecutes people. We don't have to look far to see things like the crusades, the inquisition, hunt for witches, the restrictions on the ordination of women and LGBTQ folks, or the persecution of pagans and native peoples. We've shamed, we've othered, and we've ruined people's lives. Yet, Mary's reminds us that all people are loved; that nothing can separate us from the love of God; that God overturns our culture of shame; that our God moves us from shame to love, from self-loathing to self-acceptance, from death to life. Mary's example shows us the life-giving power of God's love and grace.

Ok, the first way I answer the question “why Mary?” is because she is a strong feminine example of faith. The second answer to “why Mary?” is because she’s arguably the most comprehensive witness to Jesus’ life.

In the scriptures we see Mary mentioned in a number of places from the Gospels and into Acts. More is known about Mary than about most of the apostles. The Bible records her betrothal to Joseph, the annunciation or announcement of the news that she was to bear the Messiah. Then Mary is a pretty important player at Jesus’ birth. After Jesus is born we see Mary at the visit of the magi and the shepherds, she presents Jesus at the temple, and she flees with Jesus and Joseph to Egypt. When Jesus is older we see Mary encourage Jesus to turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana, which was Jesus first miracle – a solid choice for a first miracle! Years later Mary stands at the cross at Jesus’ crucifixion. And Mary is still around in Acts when the apostles met and waited for the promised spirit. Mary is right there as a witness from conception through Pentecost. She saw it, lived it, and was arguably the primary witness.⁴ She witnesses what we experience in the scriptures – she sees the whole picture of Jesus’ life.

Alright, so far we’ve answered “why should we care about Mary?” by noting that she’s a strong feminine examples of faith and because she’s arguably the most comprehensive witness. And finally, the last example for today is that she is known as the theotokos or “God-bearer.”

Theotokos literally means “bearer of God.” The term theotokos was given to Mary by the church in the third century.⁵ Mary was the one who carried God. I imagine her taking care of those stinky poops and late night feedings. She worried about him when he went off to school and she fixed him many meals. She was the one who took on the responsibility of raising Jesus throughout his life. And of course if bearing all that wasn’t enough, she literally had God living and growing in her. What an awesome responsibly and gift for Mary!

We too are God-bearers given an awesome gift and responsibility. In our baptism we are reminded that we are God’s beloved children and that there is nothing we have to do to earn that gift. Like Mary, we are also given a responsibility. In today’s baptism we gave Jeannie a candle and reminded her to let her light shine before others so that it might be glorifying to God. So too we have that responsibility. We are given the gift of God embodied in our lives. This gift frees us from fear, for we know that we have companions

⁴ Pfatteicher, Philip H., New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints. “August 15: St. Mary the Virgin, Mother of Our Lord.”

⁵ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20061218JJ.shtml>

on our lifelong journey, like the best running mate or diet buddy. We have our Christian friends and our God who reminds us that we are loved, which allows us to confess our stupid mistakes, which gives us opportunities to care for each other.

Here at Wicker Park Lutheran we take that responsibility and opportunity seriously. We've been reflecting for months now on where God is leading us. We've thought of ways to reach out into the community more fully through a booth at Wicker Park Fest and our upcoming trick-or-treating. We notice the opportunities we have to encourage others to live a full and abundant life. And so here we've engaged in Arts Sanctuary to get our minds thinking about the world in new ways through conversation, art, food, beer, and music. Yet, we've also been empowered by the leaders of the church to take a risk - to step up and participate in something new, to create something innovative, and to ultimately be vulnerable with each other. Through The Listening Project and their follow-up conversations we have a chance to find ways to be God-bears, to be faithful witnesses, and to be examples of faith in our daily lives.

And so today we might ask the question "Why do we care about Mary?". And we could say that it's because of her example of faith, or her comprehensive witness, or that she is the theotokos. But perhaps it's Mary's life and witness that turns our questions about her into questions for you. Might she ask you: how have you seen God's love liberate you from shame? And, how have you recognized that you are a theotokos, or God bearer, recently? Perhaps these questions might just remind us that we are loved and we are set free to love one another. Amen.