

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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For far too long Western Christianity has worked to domesticate Mary. Even the title for today's feast day, "Mary, the mother of Jesus" quickly reduces her role to motherhood. During Advent, preachers talk about Mary's submission to God's plan. At the cross, John's gospel said that she needed to be cared for by the disciple whom Jesus loved. Yet, today's gospel paints a different picture of Mary.

Today, we heard Mary sing the song of her people, which we call the Magnificat. Mary's song finds itself located among similar songs with political implications. These songs were written by women like Hannah in 1 Samuel, Miriam in Exodus, Deborah in Judges, and Judith in the Deuterocanon. You see, Mary's song is nothing new. In fact, we hear Mary sing of the ways God has shown strength with God's arm—which recalls how Moses's outstretched arms opened the sea and saved the Israelites (Exodus 6, 14) and helped the Israelites win a war with the Amalekites (Exodus 17). So too, Mary recalls the promises made to Sarah and Abraham—the ways God has been merciful and has remember the lowly.

Mary's song is not only a song about the past, but also a song that centers God within her present reality. You see, the first four verses are about Mary. She's singing of the ways that God has blessed her in that moment. The ways God has favored her, even though the rest of the world calls her lowly and dispensable. But, again, Mary doesn't stop there. Mary goes on to have a future-oriented perspective singing about how future generations will receive Moses's life, Sarah and Abraham's life, and her life.

It's partly because of this past, present, and future mentality that Mary received the title of "Theotokos" or "God-bearer" in the fifth century. It's likely that they were mostly thinking of her womb when they gave her this title. But I also like to think that the Magnificat is another example of her bearing God's presence. A presence that is across all time. A presence that lives through you, me, and into future generations.

Yet far too often we fail to recognize this presence in others. We see those with different skin colors as enemies instead of God-bearers. We demonize the other political parties rather than acknowledging that they carry the image of God. We look in the mirror and harshly judge the person we see rather than embracing that we are God-bearers. You see, the root of so much evil, fear, and death comes from our inability to see that through our baptism we become God-bearers. We received a calling to carry God's presence into the world and to birth justice, peace, hope, and new life.

Earlier this week, the world received a report from the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We were faced with a stark reality that past and present generations have had a huge impact on the future. We heard these scientists clearly say that “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land.”¹ It was a powerful statement. So too, it was sobering to hear that we are locked into 20 years of worsening climate impacts no matter what we do.² While I’m not a scientist, the storms almost every day last week seemed to hammer home that something different is happening. Pair that with the NOAA announcing that July 2021 was the hottest month on Earth since record-keeping began. It’s sobering. These organizations tell us that it’s likely that the years ahead will impact the poor more than the rich. It’s likely that coastal areas will suffer from flooding and the collapse of fragile ecosystems. It’s likely that most of us will see intensifying water cycles that bring periods of intense rain and flooding followed by severe drought.³

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/09/climate/un-climate-report-takeaways.html>

² <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

³ <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

While climate change has been brought on by humanity, historically speaking God has had a hand in getting humanity out of sticky situations. Remember, Moses and the sea? Remember, Noah and the storm? Remember, Jesus calming the storm? That's one of Mary's gifts—remembrance. She reminds us to look back to the ways our God has worked with humankind, has inspired humankind, and has challenged humankind to make a way where there seems like none. To be clear: It's not that we sit back and do nothing, or that we offer a prayer for some immediate answer, or that we rub the Bible or our belief system like a magic lamp hoping for a cure-all. Rather, what Mary emphasizes is that we as God's people are in partnership with God's work. We are God-bearers who follow in God's footsteps to care for the poor, to feed the hungry, to lift the lowly, and to have mercy on those in need. You and I, we, bear the image of God—a God who creates a world that is nourishment for all. A God who invites us to collaborate with creation. For our God has made a promise to us—a promise to be with us, a promise to propel us into something prosperous, a promise to love us through it all.

Perhaps that's the gift Mary brings us on her feast day. Maybe she reminds us of God's mighty acts in the past and that God calls us to notice the divine in those around us. Perhaps she reminds us of that because, well, the future is often uncertain. But what is certain is that God is with us, that we are God-bearers in this world, and that we have an opportunity to partner with God's spirit to bring about abundant life for all of creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.