

## *The Blessed Mother*

6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 11, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Luke 1:26-31

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

John 19:25b-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup>When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Acts 1:12-14

<sup>12</sup>Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. <sup>13</sup>When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup>All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

*This is the final week in our series, "Kids' Stories All Grown Up." Today, we take a grown-up look at Mary, the mother of Jesus.*

Other than her place of honor in the annual Christmas pageant, Mary is largely ignored by Protestants. Part of this is Protestant reaction against the extreme Roman Catholic veneration of Mary.<sup>1</sup> Part of it may be simple neglect. Regardless, it is time for Protestants to recover our appreciation for and understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary while avoiding the extremes.

*Birth, Life, Death . . . Resurrection*

Of all the people who crossed paths with Jesus during the course of his life on earth, only his mother, Mary, was with Jesus each step of the way. In the Gospels and Acts, Mary appears at key

#### The Immaculate Conception

Many Protestants confuse the Christian affirmation of the Virgin Birth with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

From the first decades after Jesus, Christians have claimed that Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The importance of this claim had little to do with Mary – it was a way to affirm that Jesus was truly human. When we recite that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" in the Apostles Creed, we are affirming Jesus' genuine humanity.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not about Jesus' conception, but about Mary's! It is the belief that Mary was without original sin from the time of her own conception. It isn't hard to see how some Christians might come to such a belief as they contemplated Mary's role as the "Mother of God." Among Catholics, belief in the Immaculate Conception grew over many centuries and became official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. Pope Pius IX wrote that "the most blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instant of her conception." Nonetheless, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is not affirmed by Protestants.

<sup>1</sup>In recent years growing numbers of Catholics have petitioned the Pope to declare Mary, Co-Redeemer with Christ! Certainly, the Pope is unlikely ever to equate Mary with Jesus or undercut Jesus' uniqueness as the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Still, the effort illustrates the extremes in devotion to Mary that are possible.

points in Jesus' life. Of course, as wonderfully told by Luke, Mary's story begins with God's choice of her to be Jesus' mother (Luke 1:27-56; 2:1-40). Despite being unmarried and thirteen or so, when God calls Mary she responds in faith and obedience. Martin Luther wrote that Mary is the embodiment of God's grace; a grace that enables faith. In a recent essay, Timothy George wrote, "Mary was a disciple of Christ *before* she was his mother . . . She is called blessed not because of her virginity or even her humility, but because she was chosen as the person and place where God's glory would enter most deeply into the human story."<sup>2</sup>

In the one Gospel story from Jesus' youth, Mary upbraids him for abandoning the family in Jerusalem when he went to the temple alone (Luke 2:41-52). Jesus was respectful to his mother, but his words must have cut right into her heart.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' first public miracle results from Mary's insistence that Jesus help out at a wedding feast (John 2:1-5). Later, perhaps fearing that Jesus had lost his mind, Mary seeks to protect him from the crowds (Mark 3:20-35), only to hear Jesus redefine his family as those who do God's will. Only a parent could fully appreciate the hurt Mary must have felt. These three episodes illustrate that being Jesus' mother must have been difficult at times – long before Mary had to confront her son's horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

At Jesus' crucifixion, when the crowds have all left, Mary is still there, with John and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25-27). While hanging on the cross, Jesus commends his mother to John's care. By doing so, Jesus ensures that not only will his mother not be left destitute and alone, but that she will also be explicitly welcomed into the new family that Jesus has created. She stays with the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension and is with them in Jerusalem as they all await the arrival of the promised Helper and Comforter (Acts 1:12-14).

#### *The Serene Contradiction*

Kathleen Norris speaks of Mary as a "serene contradiction." Norris writes, "I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are supposed to believe about her. And she doesn't make it easy. . . . The point about Mary is that she is [many] things, and more, always more. She is poor yet gloriously rich. She is blessed among women yet condemned to witness her son's execution. She is human yet God-bearer, and the Word that she willingly bears is destined to pierce her soul. Had we a more elastic imagination, we might be less troubled by Mary's air of serene contradiction."<sup>4</sup>

#### God-bearer

In Christian theology, Mary is referred to as the *theotokos*, literally, "God-bearer." In early Christianity, there were some who wanted to refer to Mary only as *christotokos*, literally "Messiah-bearer." The Christian community affirmed the term *theotokos*, not because of what it says about Mary, but because of what it says about Jesus. It doesn't mean that Mary is the source of God, but that she is the one through whom God was made flesh. Thus, calling Mary *theotokos* was a way to affirm Jesus' divinity, just as the Virgin Birth was a way to affirm Jesus' humanity.

Perhaps the place for us (for me!) to begin recovering our appreciation of Mary is to see in her a magnificent model of total trustful devotion to God. When an angel comes to her, announcing that God has chosen her, Mary's reply is simple: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Mary responds to God with trusting obedience, knowing the "real-world" consequences of an unmarried pregnancy. Her devotion to her son would endure all the way to his crucifixion and death. Mel Gibson's portrait of Mary's devotion in *The Passion of the Christ* is free of any concerns about doctrine or contradictions. Instead, we see Mary's steadfast, enduring love of Jesus. Christ may have been abandoned, even by Peter, but Mary stayed true. The faith of all was preserved in this one person, this Blessed Mother.

<sup>2</sup>from "The Blessed Evangelical Mary," in *Christianity Today*, December 2003. Professor George is an historian and Dean of the Divinity School at Samford University.

<sup>3</sup>for more on this, see the Dec 28, 2002, Background Study, "Growing Up Fast," at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)

<sup>4</sup>from "The Serene Contradiction of the Mother of Jesus." This is Norris' foreword to *The Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* by Gaventa and Rigby.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(stories of Mary)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Day 1 Luke 1:26-59 The announcement of Jesus' birth and Mary's visit to Elizabeth</b>	<b>Day 2 Luke 2:1-39 Jesus' birth and his presentation at the temple</b>
<b>Day 3 Luke 2:41-52 Jesus leaves his parents to go the temple</b>	<b>Day 4 John 2:1-12 Jesus obeys Mary and turns water into wine at a wedding</b>
<b>Day 5 Mark 3:20-53 Mary and the family try to deal with Jesus' perceived madness!</b>	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>

## Sermon Notes

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### July Book Recommendation

*The Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis

This is turning out to be a C.S. Lewis summer. *The Screwtape Letters* is a Lewis classic. The letters are the instructional correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his wannabe diabolical nephew Wormwood. As mentor, Screwtape coaches Wormwood on how best to tempt his "patient" away from God! This is great stuff and will cause you to laugh, to think, and to pray!

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

**The fifth "Fruit of the Spirit" evening lecture, *Self-control*, will be this Tuesday, July 13, at 7pm in Piro Hall with Rev. Kathryn Self.**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In most UMC churches, there are typically a pretty large number of members who grew up attending a Roman Catholic church. (Why this is so is another interesting discussion topic.) When it comes to Mary, there is a substantial divide between Catholics and Protestants. Assuming there are people in your group from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, you might make a list of the varying impressions and knowledge of Mary. Why do you think Catholics are so devoted to Mary? Why have Protestants often ignored her (except at Christmas time!)? You might discuss some of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, such as the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception (Mary was born without original sin), Mary's perpetual virginity (the consequence of which is the Catholic belief that Jesus had no half-siblings), and Mary's Assumption (the belief that Mary has already been bodily resurrected and glorified in heaven). Why do you think that the Roman Catholic Church would come to hold these beliefs - what is it about Mary?
2. What can we learn from Mary and her experiences with God? Knowing that none of us will ever be "God-bearers," in what ways might Mary be a model for us? Here's an example. Luke tells us that Mary was "favored" by God. But being favored meant that Mary would become pregnant and bear a child out of wedlock - a child destined to die a shameful and horrible death on a Roman cross. You can bet that many of Mary's townspeople weren't very understanding of her condition! God's favor towards us does not always conform to what we think favor ought to look like. Mary was called to be obedient and she obeyed. We are called to be obedient. Do we obey? Do we see the power that lies in being obedient to God? Does our obedience ever cost us anything? Do we think that God's favor - God's grace! - comes cheaply? Mary's did not.