

Bearing *Christmas*
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
Luke 1:26-38—The Annunciation
(Luke 1:46-55—The Magnificat)
December 21, 2014
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC

When I was six weeks old I played Baby Jesus. When I was three and four and five I was a sheep and heard “Mary had a little lamb” jokes. Then I was in the angel chorus for a few years. I have even been a shepherd. When I was 12 or 13 I played Mary. It was not a play, but a tableau—where you were supposed to be perfectly still in a freeze frame. The Sunday School Superintendent Mr. Davis was in charge of the Christmas eve program and he was getting a little frustrated at rehearsals when I would move my foot or turn to look at the narrator or the congregation instead of the baby doll in the fake manger. I was bored. I knew the story inside and out and I knew that when it really counted I could be still. That Christmas eve when I took my place as Mary, the mother of Jesus, I sat perfectly still and did not move one single time. Mr. Davis was amazed and he told me so afterwards.

I remember just thinking about how tiny the real baby Jesus must have been. Surely *he* would not have been completely still. And neither would Mary or Joseph or any of the animals for that matter.

Many years later when I became a mother was the next time I was in the nativity scene. With each of my girls as Jesus, Mark and I played Joseph and Mary. And none of us were still. The time outside it was in the cold and the baby kept crying. Here was baby Jesus with a pacifier in her mouth, but that did not work either so my little Jesus cried, just like the real one, I think.

Playing Mary has been intriguing for me, from that first time being required to be still to the times with a crying or sleeping baby in arms. I have learned that a mother’s arms are always more comforting than the hay of the manger.

The Gospel of Luke tells us more about Mary than any other source. We learn that she is the favored one of God, the one who will carry this holy child into the world. Where Psalm 89 tells of the chosen King David’s lineage was forever promised to carry the **hesed==steadfast love of God** into the future, Luke writes about God’s angel Gabriel announcing that the favored Mary is **blessed to carry the Messiah** into the world. Where the heavenly king is known to dwell in the eternal realm during David’s time, the Son of the Most High comes to live in the flesh during Mary’s time *“for nothing will be impossible with God.”*

Gabriel’s message to Mary is one that serves as a calling to her as a prophet in four classic movements and as a prophet she responds.¹

1-There is a greeting and a proclamation or call of how Mary is to serve God.—continuing from verse 28.

And Gabriel came to her and said, *“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” And she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

2-Like every prophet before her, Mary objects to the call by explaining how this is not practical. *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*

3-Gabriel speaks for God who ignores Mary's objection and continues with the call. *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."*

4-God through Gabriel reassures Mary that God is with her by saying, ³⁶ *"And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."*

Mary does not hesitate but responds out of obedience once she hears that God is with her. *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

Mary is one who is both humble and pondering, but she is also one who takes action. God favors the humble and obedient Mary and honors her with the responsibility to bring the Christ into the world, to participate in the incarnation blooming forth so that salvation will come to all humanity. Mary's act of obedience ushers in the intersection of the eternal realm of the heavenly king with the temporal world of human life. **God with Mary** meant flesh and blood, God who is real and among humanity, a prophetic revelation in time.

The church definitively confessed the incarnation of God in the Nicene Creed written at the first ecumenical council in 325 CE. They confessed that Jesus Christ was of the *same substance as the Father*, meaning Christ was *begotten* of the Father and *not made* as a creature, and thus also confessing that *Christ, the Son was before all time, co-eternal with the Father*. This specific language indicated that the Son is God and the Father is God, not that the Son was lesser. **The humanity of Christ does not make the Son inferior to the Father.**

To further clarify the church's confession about the Trinity, another ecumenical council was held at Constantinople in 381 to revise the Nicene Creed to also give equal standing to the third person that the Holy Spirit is God too. Now the reason I share this with you is that the church continued to work out its understandings of this event that reveals the incarnation. **In 431 CE at the Council of Ephesus, the church reaffirmed the Nicene Creed and also called the Virgin Mary by the term "Theotokos" which means "God-bearer or birth-giver of God."**

Christ is at the center of Luke's gospel, but Mary gives us understanding and shows us how to participate actively in the mission of Christ to reconcile the world because Christ shares in humanity with us. This mission is what we hear in Mary's Magnificat...

"My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ *The Lord's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,* ⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.* ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary's song challenges us to humble ourselves to make room in our hearts for God's presence so that we too might receive God's blessing. The material present can crowd out the eternal future. As Presbyterians we are among some of the wealthiest Christians in the world, so Mary's song may be hard for us to hear when she sings, "he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Writer Kathleen Norris has spent many days and nights living in various monasteries in her journey back to the faith. She describes her practice of self-examination with Mary's song.

"No doubt it was my repeated exposure to the Magnificat in monastery choirs that led me to make it the focus of encountering Mary in the Scriptures. Each time I pray, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior," I am compelled to ask, with Mary, "How can it be" that salvation has ways of working around all of the obstacles of sin, ignorance, and defiance that I place in its path? "How can it be" that God troubles with so wretched, self-centered, inconstant, and spiritually impoverished person as myself? Who, after all, am I?

"The correct answer, to paraphrase a line from the Episcopal hymnal, is that I am called to be a person whose soul, like Mary, can be God's earthly sanctuary. Like Mary, I am invited each day to bring Christ into the world in my prayers, thoughts, and actions. And each evening, as I pray the Magnificat, I am asked to consider how I have done in this regard. Have I been so rich, stuffed full of myself, my plans, and my possessions, that I have in effect denied Christ a rightful place on earth? Or am I poor and despairing, but in my failures, weakness, and emptiness more ready and willing to be filled with God's purpose?"ⁱⁱⁱ

What might be more helpful for us today is to see ourselves like Mary in the simplicity of faith. We too struggle to understand what God has in mind, yet we can grow like Mary to be open to serving God into the unknown future. Mary is a constant with Christ in his life—trusting to be not only his mother, but also *Theotokos* in bearing Christ into the world no matter what her situation in life, or his situation even. Mary is always a faithful disciple, a God-bearer regardless of the suffering and danger Jesus the Christ faces even unto the cross. The incarnation of God in Christ makes our participation possible to be faithful too. The door is now open to humanity to experience the fullness of God in Jesus Christ. Mary is the first vessel, the first bearer of God's accommodating, unconditional love in Christ.

God does the blessing in the *Magnificat*. Mary teaches us how to love God, how to be open to God, humbly as a servant, faithfully responding as a prophet and disciple to partner and live into the mission of God in Christ. Mary is our sister in Christ, one whose obedience to God gives birth to God's power, fullness, mercy, grace, and love in the world. **Mary opens the way for the ordinary person to partner with God in bearing God's righteousness and justice into the world manifesting itself as steadfast love and faithfulness.**

The last time I was in the nativity I was a wise woman because we did not have enough young men in the family. That was the Christmas when Mark's dad Bill was so ill with cancer that he could not join in the family celebration. Instead we decided to give him the gift of Christmas by videotaping the rest of the family playing the parts of the story of the birth of the Christ child. It is still one of my favorite Christmas memories because we all participated in bearing Christ to and for Bill.

In his *Church Dogmatics* Reformed theologian Karl Barth described the birth of Jesus Christ as “the miracle of Christmas.”

The miracle is twofold: First, it is an inconceivable thing, from the standpoint of human logic, that God would enter fully into human existence. God did not simply pay us a visit, arriving at Christmastime and staying around for 30-some-odd years. Rather, God revealed to us, in Mary, and through God's birth, that God has entered fully into the human condition; God *is human* in Jesus Christ. The second miracle is precisely that like Mary we are included in it. Despite our incapacity to contribute, we are real participants in the work of God in the world.^{iv}

And that year the whole family participated in the Christmas story for Bill, we all understood a little better how that **second miracle** draws us into the heart of God in Christ, especially those of us who struggle to believe and respond and respond like Mary with

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

--This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Mary as a prophet is an interpretation shared by Alice M. McKenzie in “A Mother’s Wisdom,” the blog Edgy Exegesis, Patheos, 2011. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Mothers-Wisdom-Alyce-McKenzie-12-12-2011> accessed 12.18.2014.

ⁱⁱ Mary’s Magnificat is reminiscent of Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2: 1-10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, “Foreword” of *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xi.

^{iv} Karl Barth, “The Miracle of Christmas,” # 15, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. I, Part 2*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956).