

## The First Disciple

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For South Congregational Church on August 22, 2010  
A Feast Day for Mary, Queen of Heaven  
Readings: Psalm 71 and Luke 1:39-56

Typically in the weeks following Pentecost and Easter, we hear about the ministries of the early disciples after Jesus death, from the works of Paul to the healings of Peter and James in the Acts of the Apostles. But I'd like to explore with you the life of a disciple we don't hear much about, that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. If we look at her more closely, I believe she has much to tell us about discipleship, about saying "Yes" to God.

In other parts of the Christian church, today is a feast day that celebrates Mary, and that is why I chose today to talk about her with you. She deserves to be looked at on her own, away from the Christmas story, which for many of us, is the only time we hear about her all year. Mary is someone who doesn't get much air time in the Protestant Churches. She is part of church tradition that got left behind in the changes of the reformers. There was so much argument about who she was and how to consider her that devotion to Mary was seen as a distraction from a simple path of discipleship through the bible.

Today, if you mention Mary to most Protestants you'll get a knee-jerk reaction that she is "too catholic" to talk about. Yet, all three of the first reformers, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, considered Mary with great esteem and honor as the mother of Jesus, even though they rejected many of the doctrines and traditions that had risen up about her in

the Medieval church. But Mary's appeal goes beyond even the boundaries of Christianity.

It might interest you to know that Mary is very beloved by Muslims – and in fact, there is more written about her in the Qu'ran than in the New Testament. She is the only woman in the Qu'ran to have an entire chapter named for and written about her. My point is, she doesn't belong only to one part of Christianity – she belongs to anyone who hungers for the story of God joining us in our humanity.

Today I want to reclaim Mary, to look deeper at her with you. We do not have to agree with other Christian doctrines to examine her as the woman who can come to life in our scriptures: the mother of Jesus and I would venture to call her, the first disciple.

The bible tells us she was betrothed but not yet married to Joseph when the Christmas story takes place. Betrothal was a practice of contracting for marriage that was done in ancient times when a young girl first entered puberty – so Mary would likely have been 13 or 14 years old. When the angel Gabriel appeared to her in Luke's Gospel and told her she would give birth to "The Son of the Most High", she would have known the penalty for being found with an unwed pregnancy. By the Law of Leviticus, she could be stoned to death, or at the very least subjected to the trial of bitter waters, a humiliating public ritual to determine if she was guilty. It would have been Joseph's right to claim these traditions. At the moment of Gabriel's visit, she would not yet have known what Joseph would do and still she said, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." Pretty gutsy, an act of outrageous courage, perhaps even a militant readiness to lay down her life if it meant that a Savior could come to the world.

The very next thing she does after Gabriel's visit is go to her cousin Elizabeth, to whom she speaks the witness of faith we heard in today's scripture. In the traditions of the church, that prayer is called The Magnificat or the Canticle of Mary. "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior" and then, "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." These are fighting words! These are revolutionary words. In the 1980's, the government of Guatemala banned any reciting of Mary's Magnificat because it was deemed too politically subversive!

In his book "The Real Mary", Scot McKnight imagines her not as a serene Madonna dressed in blue up on a pedestal, but rather as "a muscular, wiry woman whose eyes were aglow with a dazzling hope for justice and whose body evoked a robust confidence in the God who was about to turn the world upside down through her son." Mary the revolutionary! Well, we can't be sure, but what a thought!

If Jesus was raised by a real woman, a passionate devout Jewish mother – would he not have learned much about Torah from her? Would he not have heard the fire of her faith as she taught him how to be a faithful Jewish man? Is it too shocking to think we might hear some of her influence and passion in Jesus' later teachings and ministry?

What would it have been like to raise such a son? We know from brief stories in the bible that she may not have understood what was happening on a number of occasions. We hear the story of Jesus at age 12 staying behind in Jerusalem, and Mary and Joseph's frantic search for him. The scripture says they were astonished when they

found him in the temple, conversing with such wisdom. What other ways did he surprise and astonish her as he was growing up?

Near the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry, the Gospel of Mark says that the crowds were so stirred up by Jesus' teaching that they weren't even letting him eat. "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind". Was Mary trying to stop him? When the crowd tells Jesus that his family is calling for him, Jesus answers, "who are my mother and my brothers? . . . whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." A rebuke to Mary perhaps? Or a call to her to trust him? Nancy Duff writes, "Mary, like all of us, was not called into perfection but into discipleship."

And what about Mary at the cross? The Gospel of John tells us that Mary his mother was there. As her eldest son, Jesus would have been responsible for Mary after the death of Joseph, both to provide for her and to protect her, according to Jewish law. From the moment of his arrest, then, Mary was vulnerable and on her own. Upon his death, she would be dependent on the mercy of others to survive. Was she scared for her own life? And here she was watching her son die a torturous, humiliating death as a common criminal. As a mother of two sons myself, I can't imagine having to live through that. But she was also watching her Savior, the Anointed One, apparently being destroyed by human hands. Had she, like the disciples, expected him to claim an earthly throne, a seat of power like King David? What could have been happening inside her? The bible only tells us that she stood at the foot of the cross.

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner writes that at first she had seen Mary as passive and weak in that moment at the cross, but then after meditating on her, Jeanne remembered an

experience of her own life that opened her eyes. She thought about a close friend she had visited after a terrible car accident. Jean recounts how at first she stood alone in the hallway at the hospital, waiting and feeling helpless while her friend lay in a coma; but then she went to her bedside and talked to her friend, prayed softly in her ear, touched her pale skin, reminded her of the people who loved her and were pulling for her. By the time she left, she realized she had gone from feeling helpless to feeling fierce. It was at this moment that she finally understood Mary at the cross. Jeanne wrote, “Fierceness is waiting when you cannot alter the situation . . . Fierceness is staring into the face of suffering and it has nothing to do with passivity.”

When I imagine the searing pain of Mary’s soul on that long and terrible day, Good Friday, I can glimpse in Mary a love so fierce that it would withstand even the possibility that all she had believed about her life had been wrong. (pause)

This was the son she had held in her arms as an infant under the Star, whom the Magi had worshipped! This was the son whom God had asked her to risk everything to bring to birth! This was the son about whom John had proclaimed in the desert – prepare ye the way of the Lord! But if this son was to die a tortured humiliating death, then she would help him do it. This fierce love of her child and her God sustained Mary, and the cross did not defeat it.

I wonder, might the words of our psalm today have been in her heart? “No one whose hope is in You will ever be put to shame.”

If I could only trust God that much.

We know that she did not give up on Jesus or on the God she had trusted her whole life - for the gospels tell us Mary was with the disciples in the locked room on the day of Pentecost –and later that she was constantly in prayer with them in the early days of the church. She who had believed beyond all hope, lived to see God’s saving power come through the death and resurrection of her son! Mary’s very human life is a testament to the power of faith to trust in God to make a way out of no way– she who loved fiercely even when she didn’t understand.

Mary models for us a tremendous witness of discipleship. Surely even we can teach, mentor, invite and encourage others on their paths of faith, as she did? We can be witnesses of our own struggles in faith, even the times we don’t understand what God is up to. Let us pray to God for a heart like Mary’s, brave enough to burn with a love so fierce that no cross will defeat it.

May we be able to trust God that much. Amen.