

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner. 12-14-08  
Advent 3, but using texts from Advent 4  
Luke 1:26-38

### Mary

Whenever I get ready to preach on Mary, I enjoy looking at the way artists have painted her throughout the years. Most of the pictures that I see look similar to the Mary here on our mantle behind the table. Let's call this particular viewpoint of Mary, nativity-scene Mary. Paintings of nativity-scene Mary are usually painted in soft, pastel colors. Typically, the painting looks dreamy – almost fuzzy in appearance. Nativity-scene Mary almost always has a covering on her head, part of the robe drawn around her body. You see a few paintings in which she has an open posture. But usually, she looks guarded, afraid.

One of my favorite Annunciation paintings was done by Simone Martini in 1333. The painting shows nativity-scene Mary with one hand in a book, as if the angel has interrupted her reading time. Her posture is tense. She is leaning back, away from the kneeling angel Gabriel. Mary's face is etched with fear and grave concern. Her other hand clasps her robe tightly around her body in a move that screams self-protection. She sits on the edge of her seat, about to bolt out of the room at the first opportunity.

Martini's painting pries open your imagination about what that moment could have been like— Gabriel's announcement to Mary. You look at that painting and you see Luke's words spring to life: "But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." You look at that painting and you think, "How terrifying for Mary. An angel appears out of nowhere to tell her that God would like for her to birth the Messiah into this world through her body. One moment, she is just reading and doing what she normally does. And all of the sudden, in the next moment, an angel interrupts her. "Don't be afraid, Mary, but God is about to do a new creation in you. Don't be afraid, Mary, but God's holy shadowing will come upon you, just as it did over the chaos in the beginning. Don't be afraid, Mary, but when this happens, the Son of God is going to be planted in the hollow of your womb<sup>1</sup>."

Don't be afraid? Is that angel crazy? Just uttering his speech causes some butterflies in my own stomach. Of course Mary was afraid. Terribly afraid. Wouldn't you be? Imagine such a meeting. An angel. God's holy shadowing of creation. Breaking into your daily routine with wild news of a seemingly impossible call. I mean, really. Don't be afraid? Thank goodness God decided to launch such a plan way back when with Mary. For of all people, she could handle it. You or me? No way. But Mary, especially nativity-scene Mary, she was up for it. Right?

Of course she was. Just think about all the adjectives we use to describe nativity-scene Mary— pious, holy, set-apart, devoted, blessed. Most of us probably do not look in the mirror and use those same adjectives to describe ourselves. We probably do not use those same adjectives to describe each other, either. Those adjectives belong with nativity-scene Mary, not you or me. And we are reminded of that distance between us and nativity-scene Mary every year as we unpack her and place her gently on the mantle. Just look at her.

Her expression is otherworldly, reverent. Whether it is at the moment of Annunciation or at the manger itself, most paintings of nativity-scene Mary feature a halo or a golden glow encircling her head. That dramatic touch helps us to not forget her piety. And as if that visual cue were not enough, her piety is firmly planted into our imaginations by childhood Christmas pageants. With few exceptions, the girl who is lucky enough to land the part of nativity-scene Mary is always told to simply sit, to gaze at the newborn babe in her arms, and to reflect a holy, silent pondering.

Yes, if anyone could be up for the task of growing and birthing the Son of God, it would be nativity-scene Mary. Pious, holy, set-apart, devoted, blessed. Someone so much purer, so much better, so much more faithful than you or I. Nativity-scene Mary is way out of our league. And thank goodness. I mean, can you imagine God breaking into **your** daily routine with a seemingly impossible call for your life? Can you imagine God holy-shadowing **you**, causing some kind of new creation to be born and to grow within **you**? No way. We've got too many other things to do. We don't like chaos, not even holy chaos. We don't like things we cannot explain. That's a job for nativity-scene Mary, not for us.

It's so much easier to think of Mary and the incarnation in that way, isn't it. To think of Mary as being way out of our league, much purer, much holier, much more devoted, much more blessed than you or I. It is much easier to simply unpack our nativity-scene Mary once a year, look at her reverent expression, thank God for **her** willingness to jump into God's plan of salvation with both feet, and then move on. The baby is born. Christmas is over. And we put her back up in the closet for another year.

Mary's life and our life have so little in common that there is really no reason for us Protestants to bring her out unless it's Christmas. Mary's faith and our faith are so far removed in intensity that it is no problem for us to only consider her once during Advent and on Christmas Eve. When you think about it, we have nothing in common with nativity-scene Mary, do we?

Probably not. We probably have very little in common with nativity-scene Mary. However, I don't think our version of nativity-scene Mary is the same Mary of Scripture. As a matter of fact, I am pretty convinced that our version of nativity-scene Mary is **not** the Mary in whom and through whom God decided to work. Frankly, I think we are the ones who have created nativity-scene Mary, perhaps because it feels much safer to have her so drastically different from you or me. So out of our league. So much better than us regular people. So much more competent and worthy to respond to God's call.

But when we do that – when we make regular, ordinary, biblical Mary into nativity-scene Mary—we miss the whole story of incarnation. We miss the actual miracle that God decided to become a real, live, flesh and blood person through the body of a real, live, flesh and blood woman. Nativity-scene Mary is **not** the Mary of the Bible. Nativity-scene Mary is **not** the Mary of Luke's Gospel. Quite the contrary, Luke goes out of his way to point out that Mary is no one special, at least no one more special than anyone else.

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was

Mary.” This is the only introduction we have to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. We are simply told that she was an engaged young woman who lived in Nazareth.

We know nothing of her family’s history. Unlike Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew, we are not given her genealogy. We do not know who her father was or what he did. We do not know anything about her faith or her piety, pre-angel. We have no idea what she looked like or acted like. All we know is that she was a young, unmarried peasant woman who lived in Nazareth and who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Already, you can see that this Mary of Scripture has little in common with nativity-scene Mary. For if anything, this Mary of Scripture is a regular, ordinary person just like you and me.

And yet, it is to this regular, ordinary girl named Mary that God sends the angel Gabriel with an unbelievable message. “Greetings favored one,” he begins. “The Lord is with YOU.” Notice Gabriel does not say, “Greetings favored one. We have been watching you from up there. You have passed all of our mother-of-God competency tests.” No, Gabriel does not offer us any reason at all for God’s choice of Mary. He simply appears, brings greetings, and promises God’s presence in her life.

And his sudden appearance does throw Mary off a bit. The artists have that part of the picture correctly. She is troubled, to say the least, just as you and I would be. And she has reason to be troubled. Regular, ordinary Mary was simply going about her day, just like you and I do, perhaps getting things ready for her wedding, when here comes Gabriel with his message of God’s favor and God’s presence.

And then, before she can even catch her breath, Gabriel quickly reveals just what this favoring, this choosing of her by God will mean. And regular, ordinary Mary hears phrases like “Holy Spirit” and “overshadowing” and “conceive” and “bear a son.” That is a lot to take in all at once. Even Gabriel knows it is a lot to take in because he begins his words with “Don’t be afraid.” But then, right in the middle of this strange unbelievable angelic encounter, regular, ordinary Mary does something that causes us to want to put her back up on the shelf immediately and slowly back away. She listens to all those words. She asks a few questions—questions of surprise and wondering like “How”—but then, after the angel reminds her that nothing is impossible with God, Mary responds simply with confidence. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

I think this is the exact moment when we want to restore the distance between us and Mary. This is the exact moment when we want to say, “Sure she could agree so willingly because she was nativity-scene Mary. She was extra-pious or extra-holy or extra-worthy, or just extra-not-like-us. That’s why she could say yes to God’s crazy call.”

But we must resist that all-to-easy temptation. We must resist the temptation to sanitize or diminish Mary’s response by making her anyone other than who she was—a regular, ordinary person—who, when called by God, stepped out with courage and deep trust that God’s presence really **was** with her. And that Holy Presence would be enough to get her through it.

Was she afraid? Yes. Did she understand exactly what was being asked of her? Probably not. Did she comprehend God's creation process of holy shadowing in her womb? Doubtful. But did she reach through all of that, decide to trust that the Lord really was with her, and open herself up, indeed her body up, to God's crazy plan of birthing love and good news into the world through Immanuel? Absolutely.

And therefore, are we, regular, ordinary people just like Mary, also invited to become pregnant with God's possibilities? Are we, regular, ordinary people just like Mary, also invited to be open to being God-bearers, God-carriers, irreplaceable participants in God's story of salvation here and now, where we live and work and serve? You bet we are.

Meister Eckhart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic, speaks of our invitation with these words, "The incarnational labor pains began in Mary but continue inside each one of us. The Spirit unites our flesh with the One who created and continues to create us."<sup>ii</sup> Sisters and brothers, try as we might, this work of participating in God's art of salvation is not just a job for nativity-scene Mary. It is not just a job for biblical Mary, either. You and I are also invited, called, beckoned, into listening for God's wild call for how we might participate in God's work in our lives; whether that call comes on the wings of an angel or out of the mouth of a friend.

And even when that call fills us with some appropriate fear, or with questions of how, or with mind-blowing surprise; we, like regular, ordinary, biblical Mary, are invited to reach through all of that, to decide to trust that the Lord **really is** with us, and to open ourselves up for God's crazy plan and claim on our lives. For birthing the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, into this world is an ongoing project. It may have started with Mary, but it certainly did not end with her.

For our God is a God who does not change the course of history through earthquake, wind, and fire; nor through perfectly pious caricatures of humanity. Rather, our God is a God who changes the course of history through regular, ordinary people like Mary who get called. Furthermore, regular, ordinary people like Mary, like you and like me, who respond to that call with "Yes. Let it be with me according to your word."<sup>iii</sup>

People who say "yes,"  
trusting that the Holy Presence will be enough to get us through the labor pains.  
People who say "yes,"  
trusting that Gabriel's words were true—that nothing is impossible with God.  
People who say "yes",  
trusting that God uses regular, ordinary people to announce  
God's wild and crazy love for the world.  
A love that was birthed through regular, ordinary Mary.  
A love that continues to be born in us and through us  
until all the world is a new creation. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Shortlidge, Heather. 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent paper – Portable Snack 2008 in Kansas City, MO.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Willimon, Will. "The Lord is With You." A sermon preached in Duke Chapel on Dec. 19, 1999.