

## MARY, MOTHER OF GOD | AUGUST 16, 2020

ISAIAH 61:7-11 | PSALM 34:1-9 | GALATIANS 4:4-7 | LUKE 1:46-55

A couple of weeks ago, Anna and I finally sat down and watched the streaming version of “Hamilton.” Much of the musical revolves around a series of arguments and set of conflicts about what America is and should be. It makes clear how even though we live over two centuries after the framers, we still have arguments on their terms. The framers argue about how to balance national power with state power, whether the country’s future is in the cities or in the country, and whether to seek progress by revolution or by increments. And so do we. History moves on, but America never really gets past 1787.

In the Lutheran tradition, we have something kind of similar. We tend to construct our identities around the issues that were facing the reformers. History moves on, but we never really get past the 1500s. Which means we tend to see things in terms of Catholics versus Lutherans. Gospel versus indulgences. And the one I want to talk about today, faith versus works.

Faith versus works is a helpful way to understand arguments about indulgences from the 1520s. But it’s less helpful if you want to understand how to live out your vocation faithfully five hundred years later. Faith versus works can make it seem like life is a big Rube Goldberg machine. You drop in faith up at the top, it kicks around for a bit, and then eventually some good works get produced at the end. It imagines vocation as mechanical, passive, and individualistic. So today, I want to give you another way to think about our identity and purpose. And we’re going to do it using today’s reading from Isaiah.

Isaiah is made up of three separate books that are stitched together. Each book tells the story of a certain time in the Israelites’ history. The first book is focused on life before they were conquered by the Babylonians. The second book is about life in exile and diaspora. And the third book, the book we heard from today, is about the return to their homeland. The Israelites come home and think everything is going to be back to normal. But normal is over. There’s social division. There’s economic collapse. There’s physical devastation. And in the midst of that devastation, a core conviction starts to form. It comes from the prophets, it continues in Mary’s song, and it animates our life and mission today. It’s not faith versus works. It’s *God for us so that*.

First off, God is *for us*. God, Isaiah tells us, loves justice and hates robbery and oppression. In other words, God doesn’t merely exist. God doesn’t just sort of start the clock and step back to see what happens. But God actually has some intention. Some desire. Some wish. And that desire is always for the flourishing of those who have been dispossessed and worn down and hurt by the weight of life. God is *for us*. Mary’s song puts it this way. “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.” Isaiah and Mary proclaim that God is trying to achieve something for those who have been dispossessed.

This idea doesn’t sound particularly novel, but it’s actually kind of countercultural. If you get into the weeds on secularization literature, you can find all these polls about the number of Americans who believe in God. And these numbers get trotted out all the time. Something like eighty or eighty-five percent of Americans believe that God exists. But asking whether God exists is sort of the wrong question to be asking. It’s also the most boring question you can ask. Because whether God exists or not doesn’t really make a whole lot of difference. What makes the difference is whether God actually desires anything, whether God actually has any kind of intention or any sort

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

of will. Does God exist? Who cares? If God exists but doesn't care about your welfare, it doesn't matter.

In the case of the Israelites who have gone into exile, God being "for us" means that God actually wants something better for their lives. That life lived under oppression by imperial forces is not what God intends. And, more than that, through the words of the prophets, God will intervene to change the situation and bring about something new. What matters to Isaiah and to Mary and to us is that God is for us.

And second idea is that God is for us *so that*. God's interest in us isn't just to improve our lives. It isn't simply to make your life better and then go back to normal. God has a desire for the world, and that desire includes us. We are not just bystanders. When the Israelites are brought back to their home, God doesn't just set them in the city and tell them to go back to what they were doing before the exile. God creates a new kind of community that will change the lives of all the nations of the earth. God isn't simply going to fix the world and let the Israelites watch. God's intentions will come about through them. How does Isaiah put it? Through you, "the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise / to spring up before all the nations." God doesn't just clothe us in salvation because we look good in it. God clothes us in salvation so that we can change the world we live in.

This is a sort of counter-cultural idea, too. Because it flips the conversations we're used to having about power and service. We're very used to hearing that we're called to do something. Take your pick of the issue. We say that, as people of faith, we are called to address or solve or ameliorate this particular issue. And that's perfectly true. It's not wrong. The problem is that oftentimes we don't think we can. And so we don't. We imagine that God calls us to a task that we aren't equipped to do.

What Isaiah imagines is different. Because instead of just saying that you should do this thing, it says that you *can* do this thing. Maybe not perfectly. Certainly not perfectly. But you can make a difference that really matters. In the Jewish tradition, this is called *tikkun olam*. And that means the "repair of the world." God is for us so that we can repair the world and make it more reflective of God's vision, God's intention, God's dream.

So what does all this have to do with Mary? Well, Mary's song actually brings the whole thing around full circle. In the fourth century, the church had this big argument about whether Jesus was divine when he was born or if he became divine later in life. Some sort of spiritual growth spurt or something. And the answer they came up with is that Jesus was always divine. That argument about Jesus was, in another way, an argument about Mary. Did Mary give birth to a son? Or did she give birth to God? If Jesus is God when he's born then Mary must have given birth to God. So through her life, through her response to God's promise, Mary bears the divine into the world.

Mary's song is all about the *so that* of our faith. And that's why we celebrate Mary today and join her praise. It isn't because she's divine. It isn't because we're supposed to pray to her. It isn't because she's perfect. No, we celebrate her because she's human. She's like us. And her humanness is able to bring God's desire, God's mission, God's intent into the world. The world is repaired through her. Mary's song celebrates how God has been "for us" throughout history, and her life conveys the "so that" that can repair the world.

And so it is with us. When we join in Mary's song, when we are moved by God's promise like Isaiah, we don't just make things a little better. We join in God's work. We repair the world.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481  
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG