

MARY, MOTHER OF OUR LORD | AUGUST 15, 2021

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

A couple of years ago, Anna and I drove up to Montreal for a few days. Montreal has really good food and parks and museums and music. And, if you're like me and looking to take a little break from church, it also has lots of historic churches. The most famous of these is the Notre-Dame Basilica, which is so beautiful that you have to imagine it will render heaven a disappointment. It also has a line to get in that gives the basilica a slight Disneyland feel.

Equally memorable but far less crowded is St. Patrick's Cathedral, Notre-Dame's Irish equivalent, which has all the requisite stained glass and statues that you would expect. It also has a rather profound design feature. The walls are lined with images of witnesses to the faith. In front, behind the altar, you have the requisite depictions of Peter, Paul, etc. But running down the aisles all the way back to the narthex are uniform frames about two feet wide filled with depictions of lesser-known figures. Think Thomas Beckett and Yvette of Huy.



This is all fine and good. But it also raises a question. Why not pictures of Jesus? After all, we're followers of Jesus, not followers of Yvette of Huy. So why do we put her picture on the wall?

And you could imagine saying the same thing about today's festival for Mary. Mary's fine and good, but let's keep the focus on Jesus. Leave the Mary stuff for the Catholics down the street. What's the point of talking about people who aren't Jesus?

To begin, let's start with a little mythbusting about Mary. Myth #1. Mary's story a Christmas story. It's easy to see why people think this. Even going through the readings and hymns for today, they lean Christmassy. It can be tempting to think that after giving birth to Jesus, Mary became an afterthought. Her life of service was, as far as we're concerned, basically over. But when you read the gospels, you see that Mary keeps on showing up. In St. John's gospel, Mary is among the last people left at the foot of the cross. In St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles, Mary is among those waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The message is clear. Mary isn't simply the mother of Jesus. She's also a disciple of Jesus.

Which brings us to Myth #2. Mary is somehow categorically different than you and me. We often imagine Mary as a woman out of time, an ideal as much as a person. But as Paul puts it in Galatians, Mary was someone who lived "under the law." There's a double meaning here. One is that she's Jewish and abides by Jewish law. But the other meaning is that Mary is a finite person just like you and me. She isn't a person "in theory" or "in general," she's a person who lives at a particular time, in a particular place, with particular concerns, and with particular hopes. She is a person who is constrained and conditioned by her circumstances and history.

Once you get those two myths out of the way, a very different picture of Mary starts to come into view. Not some over-idealized woman who gives birth to Jesus and goes into an early retirement. But a particular person who bears the divine Word into the world and witnesses to Jesus in her particular circumstance.

And what does Mary tell us? She tells us how God lifts up the lowly and scatters the proud, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. But equally important, Mary tells us how God does these things. Not simply by taking power over other people or coercing them.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

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

No, God acts in and through our lives. Not acting by crowding other people out, but acting through the lives and vocations we inhabit.

Mary doesn't just remind us of what God does. Mary reminds us of how God chooses act. She reminds us that our faith is never something that we create for ourselves. And it is never something that just drops out of the heavens straight into our hearts. It is something that is given to us by God through the witness of others.

Even Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel, which seems like something that comes straight out of the blue with no one else involved, is understood through the witness of others. How does Mary know that "God has done great things for me?" Because God "remembered the promise he made to our ancestors." She understands God's character because of the witness of others. To use Luther's language, the only thing that creates faith is a word that comes from outside of us. That word is a gift of God. But it is made credible and trustworthy by the lives of our neighbors.

You can probably think of some of those people. Someone who bore the Word of God in your life. Who put flesh on the promises of God. Maybe a parent or a family member. Maybe a camp counselor or a social worker. Maybe a friend or a teacher. And those are just the people you know personally.

Even if you just want to hear about Jesus, you have to get other people involved. The gospel stories that tell us about Jesus were written down and edited by people. The hymns we love were composed by people. The ideas we use to think theologically and make sense of the world are thought out by people. It's never just me and Jesus. It's me and Jesus and everybody else. Faith is a gift from God mediated by others.

And it goes the other way, too. We don't just receive from others but we give to others, too. The reason we celebrate Mary's story, the reason we have commemorations, the reason we bother reading history at all for that matter, isn't so that we feel inadequate or have some impossible standard to live up to. It's so we understand that God's promises are manifested through our life and witness, too. That our particular lives, particular circumstances, particular hopes are the place where God happens in the lives of others. The reason we join in Mary's song isn't simply to imitate the praise of someone superior to us but to trust God's promise that we too make Christ known in the lives of our neighbors. That our lives make Christ known to our neighbors and those who come after us.

There's one more thing I forgot to mention about all the portraits on the walls of St. Patrick's. If you go to the back of the narthex, underneath the stairs to the choir loft, you notice something that makes you think. Some of the frames are left empty. They are empty because they are waiting to be filled. They are empty because the project isn't finished yet. They are empty because there are voices that haven't joined Mary's song yet. The empty frames make you think not because they're missing something, but because they make you realize what's present around us. Faithful witnesses. Faithful servants. Faithful disciples.

The frames are empty not because there is no one to fill them. No, the frames are empty because the song goes on.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor