

St Mary of the Harbor

Provincetown, Massachusetts



The Feast of St Mary 2019

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Luke 1:1-26, 36-55 *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. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."



Good Enough for God

Life is filled with all kinds of unexpected twists and turns. I know it has been for me. Maybe it has been for some of you as well. Challenges arise and opportunities present themselves when you least expect them. That is was certainly true for Mary. My guess is that the last thing she expected to happen was that she would find herself caught up in God's audacious plan to turn an upside down world right side up.

Long before Mary was placed on a pedestal by the church; long before she became the woman revered by Christians and Muslims alike; long before she was idealized by theologians and romanticized by artists and poets, Mary was just another young woman in a world where choices were far and few between for people like her. ¹ That God chose Mary for such a lofty enterprise says as much about God as it does about Mary. From the least among people and the lowliest of circumstances, God found the means

¹ Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran and she is mentioned more times in the Quran than in the New Testament. The following link is to an interesting article about her place in Islam

<https://www.whyislam.org/article/mary-in-the-qur'an/>

to give birth to hope in world a where hope was in short supply. And so it was with Mary, the unlikely instrument of God's grace.

It was an ambitious if not an altogether precarious plan, to say the least. And that Mary agreed to it says as much about her as it does about God. For Mary could have easily passed on God's invitation and could have lived out her days in contentment and obscurity. But she didn't.

I don't know. Maybe Mary knew what a number of churchgoers today fail to comprehend: that to find favor with God is not a prize awarded for one's righteousness. Rather, it is a call to actively participate in God's redemptive enterprise, even if it puts you at risk. In that light, Mary stands in the company of Moses, Abraham and Sarah, and Hebrew prophets from Jeremiah to Amos and Micah.

For years I have tried to figure it out but have found no satisfactory explanation as to why God chose to favor Mary and not someone else. I do have a theory though. And it is embedded in the words of Luke's gospel that have been attributed to Mary. Take a moment and ponder the words of the *Magnificat*.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." ²

But then you have this divergence: "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." ³

I don't know about you but for years I heard this portion of the *Magnificat* as God's means of addressing the injustices perpetrated upon the least, the last, and the left out in this world. But I am no longer sure about that. Humiliating the proud, knocking the powerful off their lofty perches and sending the rich away empty handed sounds more like retribution than divine justice. And it doesn't sound very merciful to me when the way to address inequity is for someone to gain something by ensuring that someone else has it taken away. It seems to me that all that does is perpetuate the same winner-loser mentality that has prevailed since the time of Cain and Abel.

The more I reflect on it, the more convinced I am that God chose Mary, not because she was poor, lowly or virtuous but because she was wasn't carrying around the baggage that comes with pride, power, and wealth. All of these can certainly become impediments to one's receptiveness to God and God's plans.

² Luke 1:46-50

³ Luke 1:51-53

Think about it. When you look at your own life, how many times has your pride gotten in the way? Of accepting help? Or asking for forgiveness? Or offering it?

What about power? How many times has the impulse to dominate a situation created a barrier to grace? How many times has the desire to exert influence over other people prevented you from stepping back and letting go of the need to control?

And then there's that rich thing. You know, you don't have to be rolling in the dough to be sent away empty. That's because being rich has less to do with what you possess than how you are toward God and other people. So when it comes to being generous, how many times has your insecurity influenced your decisions to withhold that which you have and others need; things like time, money, compassion, forgiveness, love.

Maybe being humbled a bit, getting knocked off our lofty perches and being sent away empty isn't such a bad thing after all. Sometimes it's the only way God can get our attention. Sometimes you have to let go of everything that stands between you and God in order to be receptive to the grace being offered to you. Sometimes you have to become completely empty before God can fill your life with all that is truly good.

For centuries, Mary has been held up as an exemplar of faith and rightly so. But Mary was also human like the rest of us. She had her own issues. She just didn't let them stand in the way of an opportunity to become a partner in God's audacious plan. It turns out that Mary had exactly what was needed: an open heart and a receptiveness characterized by a profound trust that God could remake the world to become more like heaven. And that was good enough for God.

It was true then and it is true now. You don't have to be perfect, just good enough. For all that God needs to turn an upside down world right side up are people who are receptive to the idea of bringing love into the world.