

Mary: Partner in Subversive Hope

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
December 3, 2023

Luke 1:46-55

Today we have read a passage from the Ancient Witness of the anticipation and hope of Mary of Nazareth. Mary is receptive to the promise of liberation and her part in it, and she trusts commits herself to this vision. Like the other prophets, at first she is fearful and resists the call of God before saying, “Here I am, send me.”

Mary declares herself to be a “handmaid of God” and says, “let it be to me according to your word.” She hears the cries for deliverance and responds with courageous love.

According to the writer of the gospel of Luke, the young woman is spiritual—she’s in touch with the heavenly world—in dialogue with angels. It turns out that Mary is pregnant. This unwanted pregnancy was not unusual, but it was disastrous because she was engaged to Joseph, and he was not the biological father. One view held by some scholars was that Mary was a victim of rape by a soldier of the occupying Roman army. (See *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, by Jane Schaberg) Yet a vision begins to form within her, and she slowly anticipates a remarkable future in spite of her dire circumstance. She comes to see that the pregnancy is not just a negative thing after all, but it is connected with a higher purpose. She sings that God has looked on her “humiliation” or her “lowliness” with favor and has “helped” her and the child, and that the Spirit is at work.

New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Johnson, writes that in the Christian tradition there are two ways to relate to Mary.

The first way is to see *Mary as a patron*. In this model, God is like some king who sits high above on a throne. So high, in fact, that the only way to reach God is through important people who serve as intermediaries and intercessors, pleading our cause before God. Because God is so unapproachable, we need friends in high places, and Mary, being “the Mother of the Lord,” according to this view, is the most powerful intercessor of all. The saints, in this model, are like courtiers who are part of the inner circle and who have the king’s ear. In this view, the saints in heaven exist *between* God and those on earth.

Johnson says that this patron-client view of Mary and the saints developed later after the church had officially established under the influence of the civil patronage system of the Roman Empire. And it’s not surprising that the patron-client view of God and Mary would reflect the patron-client system of the empire.

The other, older model of earlier Christianity is to see *Mary as a partner*. In this view, Mary and the saints are situated not between God and those on earth, but *alongside* their brothers and sisters on earth. “The earlier way for the living to relate to the dead saw them all as companions to one another,” writes Johnson.

And so, instead of offering prayers of petition, the main way we might relate to the saints is to remember them in a way that energizes our hope. This old way would see Mary as a kindred spirit and a partner in hope.

But this older way of relating to Mary was forgotten and for centuries the tendency in the church has been to view Mary as a patron and not a partner, transferring divine qualities to her and making Mary superhuman. *This was a mistaken effort to make up for a deficient theology of God.* And so, she was given “titles, shrines, iconography, and power of the great mother goddess of the Mediterranean world,” writes Johnson, “to compensate for an overly patriarchal theology of God.”

The deficient theology was this: God took on the characteristics of the emperor—violent, ruthless, powerful, male and distant.

Not only does Mary as a patron reinforce a patriarchal system and a negative understanding of God, when Mary became “divine” to make up for deficient theology of God, she also became an unattainable model of the ideal woman. Theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote:

...the image of a sublime and elevated Mary was integral to the oppression of women. She is enthroned above us. She is pure; we are filthy. She is desexualized: we have sexual needs and problems. We can never measure up to her and should therefore feel guilty and ashamed. (The Strength of the Weak)

Instead of elevating Mary to this powerful patron, Johnson says, “Let God have her own maternal face.” When we allow Mary simply to be herself, to be human, then we can see, in the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “not just Mary’s face but the face of every woman is created as an *imago Dei* (image of God).”

Let us, instead, be inspired by Mary, that *Jewish peasant woman who believed in a just and fair world*, as a colleague and partner in hope. She was no mere vessel!

Let us look at Mary as a flesh and blood human being. Times were hard. She lived in a village that occupied by the Roman imperial army. The people struggled under the triple taxation of the Temple, Herod and Caesar. The rich became richer and the poor poorer. The religious institutions were hijacked by the powerful. There was widespread poverty and violence. People were desperate, frustrated, at the end of their rope. It was a powder keg ready to explode. Revolution was in the air.

And so it is in this context that Mary identifies with her Jewish tradition of the struggle against oppression. She connects with that prophetic faith that fights for justice. She is part of a long line of courageous women, such as Miriam, Deborah and Hannah, who all sing revolutionary songs of liberation and freedom. *Jesus was the son of a social activist!*

I like to say that Jesus was the son of the Joan Baez of her day. No wonder Jesus turned out the way he did! We can imagine Mary standing the people of Gaza, who are experiencing genocidal violence, massive displacement, starvation, and the bombing of hospitals and refugee camps.

And so, we are partners in hope with Mary. This is no ordinary hope. It is for a new age of justice and peace.

Mary sings of her expectation in what has come to be known as the Magnificat:

*God has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich God has sent empty away.*

The people would have cheered. Those in power would have been indignant and threatened. Today, of course, the mighty no longer have thrones—they have penthouse apartments, private jets and investments in the Cayman Islands. We no longer live under monarchies, but more like invisible plutocracies, it seems to me. And Mary’s revolutionary expectation for a new age and a new life can speak to our situation today. Kathleen Norris wrote:

The Magnificat’s message is so subversive that for a period during the 1980’s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.

It was a subversive hope of new life for those men, women and children caught in the bloody violence in Central America where over 100,000 deaths occurred in the 1980’s.

It was a subversive hope

for full equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, not separate and unequal status.

And it still is a subversive hope

for a humane and just immigration policy in this country, for we are all immigrants or descendant of them.

It still is a subversive hope

for fairness towards workers, not just for those “too big to fail,” but for the millions of those “too small to be heard,” whose wages have been decreasing, and whose health care is becoming unaffordable, and who are living on the brink.

It still is a subversive hope

for equal treatment in the criminal justice system of this nation. When it comes to the police, African American men are treated differently than White men. For those who have eyes to see, there is a persistent pattern. Young Black males are 21 times more likely to be shot dead by police than their white counterparts.

It still is a subversive hope

for equality and fairness for women across the globe.

It still is a subversive hope

of those raising their voices in the streets
challenging our oil-based economy—the dependency and subsidies—the ever-increasing burning of fossil fuels and the slow destruction of our planet,
challenging the obscene, misplaced priorities of state and national budgets, cutting funds to education while most of our common treasury goes toward the military industrial complex and private prisons,
challenging a society marked by an increasing gap between the super-wealthy and everyone else, the gutting of public spending for the common good, taxes that are regressive not progressive, wages that have stagnated as almost all of the gains of the economy have gone to the very top, and the captivity of our government by corporate wealth and power.

It still is a subversive hope
for justice and fairness, for the well-being of all, including the lowly and poor.
It still is a subversive hope
to see, as so many see, that the system needs to change.
It still is a subversive hope!

Now, our hopes and dreams are not always like the holy vision of Mary. In our striving we may become fixated or narrow-minded. Success and approval of others may so dominate our lives that it may become the only thing we anticipate. “If I can only achieve this job promotion, or this college degree or my retirement goals, then I will be happy. Or when I have enough money to purchase that new car or house, then my life will have meaning. Or if I find the perfect mate, maybe have children, then my life will be whole.” Now these goals are not bad, but in isolation, by themselves, they are dead ends. Disconnected from the broader vision of justice of Mary they can distract us. These individual goals are fine, *but they mean nothing if they exist apart from the subversive hope of the realization of our essential unity*—our interdependence and interconnectedness.

We may not always share that holy vision with Mary, but she is not all that different from us, either. She was, after all, just a poor peasant girl from Nazareth, an unlikely person in an unlikely situation. We might find it more logical for God to act through some important priest in a large city or some great king or politician, not a poor pregnant woman from a small village.

Mary was like any of us, regular human beings. And like Mary, we can anticipate the presence of God in our lives. We can expect a vision, the “Power of the Most High,” to “overshadow” us. We can look forward to the Spirit always coming to meet us in our lives, to breathe new life into us and our world. We, too, can hope to be moved in unlikely and desperate situations.

God’s word to Mary, to the world and to us is that we may have hope, that we may proclaim the coming of this hope against all odds, and that we may give birth to the coming of the presence of God amidst pain, suffering and injustice. And with this comes a sense of purpose that goes beyond all other goals and achievements and threatens the very foundation of the empire.

The mystic, Meister Eckhart, said it so well: “What does it avail me that this birth [of God’s Word] is always happening, if it does not happen to me?” In other words, like Mary, *may we give birth to the Word*. Every person, in this sense, is called to be a “Mother of God.” And so, like Mary, our prayer can also be, “Let it be to us according to your word, O God.”

Let it be to us
to live lives of love and justice
with our fellow human beings.

Let it be to us
to work for a peaceful world, to challenge the slaughter of innocent people,

Let it be to us
to achieve a sustainable environment,
to end the system of mass incarceration,
to see health care as a human right,
to have prosperity that is shared among all,
to provide good education for all children and adults—in short,
to establish a forward-thinking, human society.

Let it be to us
that we have new life of freedom
from our fears, from our past failures,
and from the chains of our personal ambition.

Let it be to us
that we expect the miracle of justice, compassion and equality being born in our
lives.

Let it be to us. Let it be to us. Let it be to us. Amen.