

*Sermon, ECOHS*

*Christmas Eve, 2017*

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!

How many of you were at the Advent IV service this morning? Those of you who were here heard me preach a sermon about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and how her faith in God shaped Jesus. The outline of her faith is found in the Song of Mary, also known as the *Magnificat*. It is a powerful message of faith describing how God has been good to her; and also how God has a plan that involves changing how things are in the world.

The specifics of her song, her faith, are straightforward: the proud, the powerful, and the rich—the insiders who run the world now-- will be on the outside one day. This is for their own good, frankly, the good of their souls. It is also good of all the people who are on the outside now. Those folks, the outsiders, are people that Mary identified with and she taught Jesus to identify with them, too. You see that in the public life of Jesus-- the powerful people that he challenged; and the vulnerable people he cared for in his ministry.

Anyway, I shouldn't re-preach the sermon from this morning. If you want, you can go to our website and listen to it or read it. I imagine I will be preaching more on the themes of the *Magnificat* in the months and years ahead. It may get me in trouble.

For this evening, this holy night, I want to build on what I preached this morning. Mary of course is central to the story of Jesus. Not just his miraculous conception and glorious birth; but central to the man he became as he learned at her feet and became even more than Mary imagined he would be as Jesus fulfilled what God had called him to be.

Mary's faith summarized in the *Magnificat* is grounded in Mary's life experiences. It is easy to think of Mary as she is portrayed in a stained glass window—beatific but one-dimensional. The real Mary and the life she lived was not one-dimensional at all. The challenges she faced, the human emotions she experienced, shaped her and by extension shaped Jesus. And if we pay attention, it will shape us, too. Let's focus on the key moments in Mary's life.

The first one we know about is her pregnancy. I imagine most of us know the basic story. The scandal for Mary—and Joseph—is that she was pregnant before she and Joseph were married. In Matthew's version of the story, Joseph was going to end their engagement and send Mary away so that they would not have to endure the shame of the scandal. This was the best option in a bad situation for them in their society.

This experience shaped Mary. She knew the message from the angel. Her faith in God gave her pregnancy meaning and purpose, despite the public shame. But still the questions, the judgment of family and neighbors, had to affect her. She knew from that time forward what it would be like to be on the outside. A girl and young woman who was exceptional in piety and spirit was now considered a fallen woman. Mary knew it was not true—but now she could identify with those for whom it was true. Mary knew now that the judgment of others was unhelpful and painful regardless of her personal situation. That knowledge shaped her.

So in Jesus' public life and ministry, when religious leaders brought the woman caught in adultery to him, he had learned from his mother what the right response was—kindness and mercy to the vulnerable; and a stiff reality check to those who would use another's situation as a cudgel to make a point.

Another pivotal moment for Mary, of course, was Jesus' birth-- what we remember and celebrate tonight. Again we think of Christmas pageants and perhaps outdoor living nativity scenes. But the reality of the first Christmas was much different. Mary and Joseph trusted in God to protect and provide for them. But still Mary gave birth outside and away from home. Can you imagine what that was like?

Again that lesson formed Mary and helped her to form Jesus. So when he saw people who were outsiders in his community—lepers, sinners, tax collectors— the “bad” people that the “good” people were taught to treat badly or ignore; the lessons from Mary taught Jesus to reach out to them and invite them in and make them feel part of what God was doing on earth.

Another transformational moment for Mary was when the Holy Family had to flee their home and become refugees. King Herod had launched a violent campaign to find and kill his newborn rival. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to Egypt to find shelter—and they did. Again this harrowing experience shaped Mary and her faith and what she taught Jesus.

So when our Lord as an adult rabbi encountered foreigners, he was open to them in a way that was different from his fellow countrymen. He admired the faith of a Roman centurion. He held his longest theological conversation with a Samaritan woman. He learned grace and humility from a Syro-Phoenician woman. Mary taught him to be open to outsiders because their family had been refugees in Egypt. Mary taught him well.

Mary also experienced what I would call failures as a parent (doesn't that make those of us who are parents feel better?). One time happened after a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem. A whole day after they left, she and Joseph realized that twelve year old Jesus was not with them. Can you imagine the conversation—“I thought he was with you?” When they did find him in the Temple, Mary sounded like a very human mother, “How could you have done this to us?” We are told that she and Joseph were anxious. I bet!

Years later, Mary became anxious again. Jesus was becoming a well-known teacher with large crowds following him. Some people, though, were saying that he was out of his mind. So Mary organized a posse of his brothers to come get him and bring him home. Jesus gently dismissed them and their efforts by saying that his real family were those who did the will of God. That had to hurt Mary.

These two moments helped Mary and Jesus learn what it meant to be in a new stage of their relationship—a mother with a special son growing into adulthood. She was no doubt proud of him and knew the lessons he had learned from her. She knew the miracle of his conception and believed the angels who said he was the Son of God. But Mary was still a mom and needed to learn to let him go—let him grow into the man that she had helped to shape; but that God would ultimately be responsible for.

This letting go for Mary would come to completion at the end of Jesus' life. She would experience what all parents fear—a child dying before them. Jesus knew-- and Mary would come to

believe, too-- that his early death was the purpose of his life. His pain and suffering—and hers—would be transformed at his resurrection and bring God’s healing to our sinful and broken world.

But that last moment in their life together was the hardest. Mary was with him at the foot of the cross as she watched her son breathe his last. And in one of the most poignant scenes in our faith—so powerfully captured in the sculpture, the *Pieta*—the dead body of Jesus was placed in the arms of his mother.

All of these moments make up Mary’s life. Not a one-dimensional stained glass window, no matter how beautifully crafted; but a rough and wonderful life filled with pain and sorrow, joy and great faith. The life of the woman who sang the prophetic words of the *Magnificat* and raised her son Jesus to live out those words in his ministry and teaching, his death and resurrection.

How could all this be? Not only the miracle of the conception of Jesus; but the miracle of her faith and life-- and his. When the angel Gabriel came to Mary with his miraculous message, she asked how she could be pregnant since she was a virgin. The angel said, “Nothing is impossible with God.” That is the lesson for all of us that helps us as we go through our lives.

Remembering “Nothing is impossible with God” helps when we hear the words of the *Magnificat* and wonder, “Lord, how long, before you set things right? How long will the rich and the proud and the powerful remain in control while so many suffer and die too soon?” We do not know, but we believe God is working over millennia to make things right. Until that day, the faith of Mary calls us to work according to God’s plan for the justice Mary described in her song.

Remembering “Nothing is impossible with God” helps us personally, too. When we face those hard moments in life, like those that shaped Mary, we can turn to God; for God works in our moments as well as over millennia. God is with us when we are outsiders. God is with us when we fail. God is with us when we suffer great loss. Those moments shape us. And if we turn and trust in God in those moments, even the most painful moments can transform us into the people God is calling us to be.

God does work over millennia—and God works in moments, too. God is working to bring things right in our world and in our lives. Our part is to trust in God and learn from our lives, just like Mary and Jesus did; and then seek always to do God’s will. If we do that, by God’s grace, we will find ourselves part of Jesus’ family. Amen.