

“Motherhood: Not a Job for the Faint of Heart”

Date: May 9, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 3:20-22; 4:1-2a; Luke 1:26-35

Theme: Mothers, Eve, Mary

Occasion: Mother's Day

Happy Mother's Day. It was President Woodrow Wilson who declared May 8, 1914, the second Sunday in May, as a special day to honor the nation's mothers, especially those who had lost their sons to war. But it was Anna Marie Jarvis and fellow members of the Methodist Episcopal Church who led the charge to make Mother's Day an official observance.

When Andrew's Methodist Church of Grafton, W.Va. held the state's first official Mother's Day on May 10, 1908, Jarvis marked the victory by bringing in 500 carnations, honoring her late mother, who had been a leader in the initial efforts to mark the occasion.

Today, gift and card-buying and other secular activities surround this holiday. It is more of a secular holiday than a religious one, but woe to the pastor who decides to ignore those most special to his or her flock. And so, the church still plays a prominent role in Mother's Day.

But it does raise some thorny questions about how to keep the focus on worshipping God, while celebrating and honoring the gifts of mothers. The answer seems obvious: Just turn to the Bible. We hardly have to turn a page before encountering Eve, the mother of all, in the second chapter of Genesis.

When we do meet Eve, who doesn't get a name until near the end of her story, we are introduced to a jarring reality: There are very few tender moments, or lovingly sentimental words, about mothers in the Bible. For the most part, biblical mothers face daunting hardships, and many of them were smart, savvy and occasionally, ruthless.

The majority of accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures involve the relationship of Moms and their sons and questions of power and dynasty. With the exception of Mary, mother of Jesus, the New Testament offers few very-well developed stories involving motherhood. This morning, let's look at two of the most well-known mothers in the Bible: Eve and Mary.

Eve doesn't enter the biblical story until Genesis 2:18-22, the result of God's search for a "helper" for God's first created person, Adam. Careful reading points to a search for compatibility and mutuality. Only after the divine surgery, in which God creates woman from Adam's side, are the creatures differentiated sexually, and gender-specific names "woman" and "man" are bestowed.

After God issues the penalties for the rupture of relationships, which resulted from the first (and continuing) human sin of trying to be like God, does Adam give his partner the name Eve, meaning "living." The woman's penalties, which included increased pain in childbirth and to live under the rule of her husband, simply reflect life as the ancient Israelites knew it.

In the next scene, God expels Adam and Eve from Eden. One verse later she conceives and gives birth to Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Abel comes along in the next verse, and eight verses later, we come to the first murder, as Cain kills his brother in a fit of jealousy. God banishes Cain, who goes to the land of Nod, takes a wife, produces progeny and launches civilization.

However, the text is silent on where the wife came from, leaving us with many unanswered questions. The last we hear of Eve, she has borne another son named Seth. Genesis 5:4 says, Adam then had more sons and daughters, but there is no mention of their mother. Interesting, Eve is the first mother. Aren't you inspired? Not yet, I'm sure. Let's move on.

Mary, as well all know, was the mother of Jesus. The name Mary is derived from Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who is called a *prophet* in Exodus 15:20. Miriam plays a significant role during Israel's wilderness wanderings.

Mary is one of six New Testament women who share a popular name in first century Judaism. Most likely, the oldest reference to Mary comes in Mark 6:3, with a parallel in Matthew 13:55, when hometown folk in Nazareth take issue with Jesus' teaching: "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

Matthew names Mary four more times, once in Jesus' genealogy and three times in the birth accounts. Here, she is a passive character, important because of her place in God's plan. To make his point, Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us."

Mary is the central character in Luke's account of Jesus' birth. She is the primary one through whom God works. However, the Divine plan to establish God's Kingdom on earth is filled with risk. The angel Gabriel explains it all. Mary may be young and innocent, but she knows where babies come from. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she asks. He points to her cousin, Elizabeth, once thought barren and now six months pregnant, and gives his reassuring promise, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary consents, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." In so doing, she becomes the model of faith and discipleship.

Mary will continue to be part of the story, which will have increasingly painful moments. At age 12, Jesus will challenge her, as she scolds him for staying behind in the temple, while the family searched for him for three days. He later rebuffs the efforts of his mother and brothers to see him, as he preaches to the crowds in Galilee, redefining kinship: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Luke does not specifically place Mary at the crucifixion, but he notes that Jesus' acquaintances, including the women who had followed him, stood at a distance and watched. In Luke's second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Mary and Jesus' brothers *are* among the disciples devoting themselves to prayer between Jesus' ascension and the Pentecost event.

The Gospel of John does not have a birth story, but though unnamed, the mother of Jesus is a commanding presence. She first appears near the start of Jesus' ministry at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee. Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman," as she presents the plight of the wedding hosts who have run out of wine.

This becomes the occasion for Jesus' first sign, or miraculous act, in the Gospel. He tells her puzzlingly that his time has not yet come. When Jesus' time does come, he will use the same title when he gives his mother over to the care of the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross.

We don't have time to examine all of the other accounts of biblical mothers today. But it is easy to see from these two, that motherhood is not for the faint of heart. Motherhood is challenging, full of joy – yes, but also filled with heartache and worry, stress and hard work.

And so I'd like to conclude with this tribute that I found on the Internet, entitled, "From Every Mother to Mothers Everywhere."

This is for the mothers who have sat up all night with sick toddlers in their arms, wiping up barf laced with Oscar Mayer wieners and cherry Kool-Aid saying, “its okay, honey. Mommy’s here.” Who have sat in rocking chairs for hours on end, soothing crying babies who can’t be comforted.”

This is for all the mothers who show up at work with spit-up in their hair and milk stains on their blouses and diapers in their purse. For all the mothers who run carpools and make cookies and sew Halloween costumes. And all the mothers who don’t.

This is for the mothers who gave birth to babies they’ll never see. And the mothers who took those babies and gave them homes.

This is for the mothers whose priceless art collections are hanging on their refrigerator doors. And for all the mothers who froze their buns on metal bleachers at football or soccer games or band competitions. And when their kids asked, “Did you see me, Mom?” they would answer, “Of course, I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” And mean it.

This is for all the mothers who yell at their kids in the grocery store and swat them in despair when they stomp their feet and scream for ice cream before dinner. And for all the mothers who count to ten instead, but understand how child abuse happens.

This is for all the mothers who sat down with their children and explained about making babies. And for all the mothers or grandmothers who wanted to, but just couldn’t find the words. This is for all the mothers who go hungry, so their children can eat. And for all the mothers who read “Good Night Moon” twice a night for a year. And then read it again, “Just one more time.”

This is for all the mothers who teach their sons to cook and their daughters to sink a jump shot.

This is for every mother whose head turns automatically when a little voice calls, “Mom?” in a crowd, even though they know their own child is at home or off at college.

This is for the mothers who sent their kids to school with stomach aches, assuring them they’d be FINE once they got there, only to get calls from the school nurse an hour later asking them to please pick them up. Right away!

This is for mothers whose children have gone astray, who can’t find the words to reach them. For all the mothers who bite their lips until they bleed when their 14 year olds dye their hair green. For all the mothers who lost a child because of gun violence on the street, or a mass shooter at the school. For the mothers of the survivors who sat in front of their TV’s in horror, hugging their child who just came home from school safely.

This is for all the mothers who taught their children to be peaceful, and who now pray they come home safely from a war.

This is for the mothers who home-schooled their children during a pandemic, trying to keep them focused and motivated, while also trying to work from home.

This is for working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Single mothers and married mothers. Mothers with money and mothers without. This is for all of you. For all of us. Hang in there. In the end we can only do the best we can. Tell them every day that we love them. And pray.

Motherhood, it’s not a job for the faint of heart.

The biblical portion of this sermon is borrowed from an article by Rev. Joan G. LaBarr, first published on May 11, 2012 in *the UM News Service*.