

Meeting Mary Again—For the First Time

sermon digest

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Luke 1:26-35

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Celebrated by Christians since the sixth century, the Feast of the Annunciation fell in the spring of the year on March 25. While the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she was going to bear a son seems to fit logically for us with Advent, early Christians assumed a natural pregnancy of nine months and counted back to the date of conception. Early tradition had also placed the death of Jesus on March 25, and all of the great prophets were said to have died on the same day of the year that they were conceived.

Christians have projected two visions of Mary. Luke identifies Mary as "a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph." Matthew concurs, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Mary is coupled with her husband Joseph throughout the birth narratives. After the visitation of the shepherds, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart," possibly suggesting that she was Luke's information source. She is also the parent addressed by Simeon at the rite of circumcision in the Temple. Outside the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, Mary's virginity is never mentioned. Mary is distinguished in the Gospels from other Mary's, not as the virgin, but as the mother of Jesus. If we are to take Mark as the earliest Gospel, the mother of Jesus first appears with Jesus' brothers (3:21-35) to take him home because of rumors of his insanity. In John's Gospel, Jesus responds to the appeal of his mother at the wedding in Cana and performs his first miracle of turning water to wine. John also notes her presence at the crucifixion of her son where from the cross Jesus assigns responsibility for the care of his mother to the Apostle John. The mother of Jesus finally appears with his brothers in Acts (1:14) at a prayer meeting with other disciples after the Resurrection.

Beyond the New Testament records, Christians focused on the innocence of the girl in the Annunciation and her virginity became an inseparable part of her name, "the Virgin Mary." Like Jesus, Mary took on an identity that more represented the spirituality of the Church than the bare facts recorded in the Gospels. The apocryphal Gospel of James identified her parents as Joachim and Anne, later granted sainthood, and elaborated her conception as a miraculous child born to a barren mother like Elizabeth in Luke, or Hannah and Sarah in the Old Testament. The "Immaculate Conception," often confused with the birth of Jesus, is a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church defined in 1854 that Mary was conceived without the taint of original sin. Some early Christians argued for the real humanity of Jesus because he was a man born of a woman, but the ancient world had little understanding of the biology of conception. Others said that Jesus passed through Mary as water through a straw, contending that she contributed nothing to his being. Since he was conceived by the Spirit of God and received nothing from Mary, these Christians assumed that he bypassed the humanity of his parents. A controversial word *theotokos*, Mother of God, was assigned to Mary because she had carried God in her womb and suckled God at her breast. Finally, Pope Pius XII defined as infallible dogma the Assumption of Mary stating that Mary bypassed the normal experience of death and was taken directly into heaven at the end of her life. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary are held as dogma by Eastern Catholics and some Episcopalians but generally denied by Protestants. Mary also appears in the Koran and is honored by Muslims. The traditional location of her home near Ephesus is a favorite tourist attraction in modern Turkey.

Will the real Mary please stand? Marcus Borg gave us the book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* in his 1994 survey of the historical Jesus. He acknowledged that the title of his book was assigned to him in a 1992 lecture series for the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ. I am not sure whether the content of the book or the title was the greater sensation. In the Preface, Borg notes that he lives in two worlds; he is a Jesus scholar in a secular university and a confessing Christian married to an Episcopal priest. He attempts to distinguish the Christ of faith that we know in our religious practice from the Jesus of history identified by the Gospels. I saw myself in the mirror of his personal pilgrimage as he described a new vision of Jesus whom he came to know again for the first time through the academic study of the written records.

Another scholar, a Roman Catholic professor at Yale, Jaroslav Pelikan, gave us two portraits from Church history, *Jesus Through the Centuries* and *Mary Through the Centuries* in which he follows the evolution of Christian art and Church tradition to demonstrate the accumulated faith of Christians. As a Roman Catholic, Pelikan was quite comfortable with the extended visions of Jesus and Mary reflected in the evolution of Church tradition. Protestants, on the other hand, have resisted the appearance of Mary's rivalry with the role of Christ. Of particular concern to Protestants has been the Catholic definition of Mary's role in salvation as Co-Redemptrix. Although viewed in a secondary place in the purpose of God, from early Church history she was viewed as a participant in the redemptive work of Christ.

Mary connects with the human world of Christians. If we can get beyond the Catholic-Protestant polarity of the Western world, the elaboration of Mary's place in history is understandable. On the one hand, she was clearly the person most identified with the coming of Jesus in to the world. The veneration of Mary as a

participant in giving life to her son and in the shaping of the life of her son is perfectly natural. It rivals some of the veneration of mothers that has become the secular orthodoxy of our culture where Mother's Day has become a sacred/secular holiday on the order of Christmas and Easter. We are interesting creatures. While we generally remember our mothers as fallible humans who have not only given us life, but have given us some of our handicaps in life, we continue to mythologize the role of motherhood with a status in life that transcends normal humanity.

I must confess to my own limitation on the masculine side of humanity. I have never given birth to a child. I definitely remember the message after the birth of our son that I would be the one to give birth to our next child. I have never accepted a secondary place of parenthood because of my gender, but I am certainly limited in my understanding of the special biology of motherhood. I recall an issue that was discussed in graduate school concerning the ethical problem of multiple marriage in African cultures. My friend Sister Mary Katherine Vukmanic noted that the Church was more opposed to polyandry (multiple husbands) than polygamy (multiple wives) because the mother needed to know the identity of the father of her child. In this age of absent fathers and neglected children, I would agree.

The Fatherhood of God in the Jewish Christian tradition has certainly contributed to the sense of exclusion of one-half of all humanity. It provided an excuse, if not an opportunity, for relegating girls and women to a subjugated role not only in the hierarchy of the household but in the worth of humanity. I sat in frustration in a Southern Baptist Convention in Kansas City about 1982, when a resolution was passed that condemned all women to the place of servitude and based it on the position of Eve as being first in sin.

Early Christians came not only from the Jewish patriarchal religion, they came out of the Gentile ranks of pagan worship, which in many cases viewed deity as female. The turn toward reverence for women as well as men and respect for women in the service of God contributed to the Mariology of the subsequent Christian centuries. Women, who had as much trouble seeing themselves in the male Jesus or in the male Apostles as I have in seeing myself in the mother of Jesus, finally had a role model that clearly said, we are included in the love and purpose of God.