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Mary, a Model for Ministry

BY D'ESTA LOVE

We know her well as the mother of Jesus, but her own story is not often told in our churches, and we seldom, if ever, hear a sermon preached about her. Even the phrase “virgin Mary” feels strange and foreign on our tongues, and we have allowed our fears of ascribing too much significance to her role in church history to rob us of learning about and from her witness. Yet she is presented in the Gospel of Luke as a young woman who finds favor with the Lord, a servant of God, and the first believer in the good news concerning God’s visitation in human flesh. Her name is Mary. She is the young virgin from Nazareth, betrothed to Joseph, who gives birth to the Savior of the world and provides us a model of responsive, submissive faith. We find the beginnings of her story included in the infancy narratives of the Gospel of Luke, which tell—even sing—of the births of two babies who will be instrumental in the salvation of the world.

As we take a close look at the figure of Mary and at her response to the activity of God in her life for the sake of all humankind, we observe a receptivity and humility to surrender her life as the “servant of the Lord.” In her story and the hymn she sings, we also see the God she serves, with whom nothing is impossible, who can create life out of nothing, who has regard for the lowly, and who is able by his power to reverse human status and expectations. In both Mary’s response to God and God’s response

to human need, we find models for ministry that call us to have eyes that see and hearts for humble service.

The virgin Mary, presented by Luke as the central figure in the infancy narrative of Jesus, is introduced at a specific point in time, the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (Luke 1:26). Thus the stories of John and Jesus intertwine. (That is especially so in the following episode, when Mary makes her visit to see Elizabeth.) Mary is introduced as a “virgin, betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David” (1:27).¹ We learn of her virginity before we hear her name, a manner of introduction not uncommon in her world. Her virginity underscores the miracle of birth that is to take place, but it also reveals her youth. (An alternate reading can be “young woman” rather than “virgin,” and the words can be used interchangeably.) In Mary’s world women were betrothed at very young ages—at times, even before their births—and given in marriage when they reached puberty. Thus we can surmise that at the time of the angel’s appearance, Mary was eleven to fourteen years old. Thus, with Luke’s introduction of her, Mary’s story begins, and as it unfolds we will learn that she is of “lowly estate,” a “handmaiden” (or, as some commentators note, a female slave), and poor, as her sacrifice of turtledoves in the temple reveals (2:24). Hers is a portrait of a powerless person favored by a mighty God. She is young in a world that respects age, a woman

in a world controlled by men, and poor in a highly stratified society. Yet we will discover that she is strong, and her strength comes from a submissive and obedient heart and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to his appearing to Zechariah in the holy place of the temple, located in Jerusalem, the city of David, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the obscure village of Nazareth of Galilee. His greeting perplexes her: "Greet-

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ings, favored one. The Lord is with you" (1:28 NRSV). As she ponders in her heart what sort of greeting this is, the angel reveals the mystery of the incarnation and the meaning of the grace with which God has favored her. He calms her fears, tells her once more that she has found favor with God, and announces the birth of Jesus. He does so in personal and intimate terms: "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (1:31). Surely, to a young girl from Nazareth who is just beginning to ponder the mysteries of life and birth and marriage to Joseph, the prophecy of the angel concerning the birth of this child and his identity is cause for wonder and amazement.

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. (1:32–33 NRSV)

Mary's response, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" (1:34), is not unlike Zechariah's, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (1:18). Each expresses the incredulity of these announcements and reflects the limitations and impossibilities associated with his or her own reality in the flesh. The angel, in turn, answers Mary's question by describing the Holy Spirit's power at work in the conception of this child, which "will be called holy, the Son of God" (1:35). As a

sign of the things he has said, he cites Elizabeth's pregnancy and declares, "For with God nothing will be impossible" (1:37).

Mary's submissive response provides us insight into why she found favor with God and the character of her discipleship. It also provides the basis of a model for all who hear the good news of God's salvation and accept the call to discipleship. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38 NRSV). As if in answer to her own question, "How can this be?" she answers, "... let it be."

Mary stands in all her lowliness and womanhood, her poverty and status as a handmaiden. She postures herself as the servant of the Lord, which echoes the opening stanza of her hymn, "for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . ." (1:48). Her words are rich in meaning and reveal the heart of this humble servant of the Lord: "... let it be to me according to your word." Do we not think that she understands the implications of the angel's words? Her objection that she has no husband surely reveals that she understands the scandal of her pregnancy and the reproach she will bear. Yet this young woman who has no husband fully embraces the scandal of faith and answers, "... let it be." Her acceptance of the will of God anticipates a theme that Luke develops concerning the true family of Jesus: "Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'" (8:19–21 NRSV).

In his book *The Word of Life*, Thomas Oden states, "The means by which God chose to come into the world would be, according to prophetic expectation, a virginal conception and birth." Accordingly, a new era dawns with Mary's "radical attentiveness, receptivity, and trust in God."² Thus the image is drawn of Mary of Nazareth, model believer and servant of God, who responds without reservation to God's plan for the salvation of the world.

The scene shifts as Mary hastens to the Judean hill country where she enters the home of Zechariah. Elizabeth greets her and addresses her as "the mother of my Lord," rather than as kinswoman. It is an intimate and private setting in which two women—one old, the other young—share the mysteries of the miracles of their God with whom nothing is impossible. In the wonder of God's activity in their lives and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they speak words of prophecy concerning the meaning of it all. As Robert Karris observes, "The meaning of God's inauguration in Jesus of the final stage of salvation history is so rich theologically that Luke interprets it twice

more, in 1:39–45 and 1:46–56.”³ Both interpretations come from the lips of these women; the first is contained in Elizabeth’s prophecy concerning the child in Mary’s womb. “Filled the Holy Spirit,” Elizabeth interprets the meaning of her own babe’s leaping in her womb, pronounces a blessing on Mary, and prophesies concerning her child. As Gabriel has revealed to Mary the birth of John, the Holy Spirit reveals to Elizabeth the significance of the birth of Jesus. Thus, as Fitzmyer observes, “each mother learns from heaven about the child of the other.”⁴

John, the forerunner to Mary’s child, leaps for joy in recognition that Mary is carrying the Savior of the world, and the occasion of the meeting of these two women becomes colored with joy and blessing. Elizabeth pronounces blessings upon Mary because she is to bear the Savior of the world, but also because she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (1:45 NRSV). Thus Elizabeth proclaims Mary to be the first believer of the good news concerning Jesus and blesses her for it.

Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s blessings and to the favor God has bestowed upon her issues forth in the hymn (the Magnificat) of 1:46–55, which interprets God’s saving activity. It is similar in structure to three other passages in Luke’s infancy narrative that have hymnic properties: the Benedictus (1:67–79), the Angels’ Song (2:13–14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:28–32). Mary’s hymn extols God for his mercy extended through her child to all believers. From her lips the great and merciful deeds of God, which have been poured out for generations before her, are interpreted as the fulfillment of promise and the remembrance of his mercy in the conception of the child to be born to her.

The hymn opens with an introduction of praise for God, in which Mary speaks in personal terms of the activity of God in her life. She then extends her lowliness to all who believe, and God’s mercy to the entire people of God. Raymond Brown describes the opening of the Magnificat as “a commentary on how Mary has ‘found favor with God’ (1:30) and her resulting eschatological joy.”⁵

And Mary said,
 “My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God
 my Savior,
 for he has regarded the low
 estate of his handmaiden.
 For behold, henceforth all
 generations will call
 me blessed;
 for he who is mighty has done

great things for me,
 and holy is his name.” (1:46–49)

In a world in which the marginalized—women, the poor, the diseased, those of low estate—were invisible and powerless, Mary sings of the God of heaven who has “regarded” this lowly woman of Nazareth. The NRSV reads, “he has looked upon my lowliness.” This language closely parallels the words of Elizabeth spoken earlier in the chap-

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ter. When Elizabeth, barren and advanced in years, conceives in her old age, she says, “Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men” (1:25). These are personal words, spoken in a world in which women sequestered and hid themselves, even covered themselves when they went into public places. Yet the God of heaven, who is God and not man, looks upon her; he takes note of her. And in seeing, he acts; he takes away her reproach from among men. Surely Elizabeth could have said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . [and] he who is mighty has done great things for me.”

It is not a new experience for God to regard his people. In fact, that is often said of God by those who are lowly and who have been redeemed or delivered by God. If we return to the Old Testament, we find many stories of deliverance told in much the same terms. The story of the Exodus is born out of the travail of slavery and oppression, as a people under bondage cry to their God for help. And the same God who had regard for the lowly estate of his handmaiden Mary had regard for the people of Israel. “And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition” (Exod 2:24–25). (The NRSV reads, “God looked

upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”) A note in the text of the Harper Collins Study Bible (NRSV) draws a contrast to the Pharaoh who rose up over Egypt and “did not know Joseph” (Exod 1:8). The expression could be translated “did not care about Joseph,” which is the same Hebrew verb that is translated “took notice of them” in 2:25. That is the connection. Unlike the Pharaoh, or those who regard barren women with reproach or who disregard the lowly, God’s loving concern is expressed in the reality that sees them and acts on their behalf.

This theme has been especially expressive in the lives of women. No one expresses it more clearly than Hagar, the handmaiden of Sarah. After Hagar learns that she is to bear Abraham’s child, Sarah looks on her with contempt and judges her harshly. In fear Hagar flees from the protection of Abraham’s tent to the wilderness, alone. But the angel of the Lord finds her “by a spring of water in the wilderness” (Gen 16:7) and gives to her child a blessing from God. He, too, will be the father of a great nation that cannot be numbered. Hagar’s response to God is, “Thou art a God of seeing” (Gen 16:13). Surely she could have said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . [and] he who is mighty has done great things for me.”

One cannot mistake the similarity of Mary’s hymn to Hannah’s at the birth of Samuel. Severely provoked by Peninnah, the second wife to Elkanah, the barren Hannah prays fervently for a child. And the God of Sarah and Hagar and Rebecca and Rachel and Tamar “takes note of her,” so that her womb becomes fruitful. She bears six children, the first of which is Samuel. With the same exultant joy we hear from Mary’s lips, Hannah sings, at the dedication of Samuel to the service of God, “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord” (1 Sam 2:1).

And, thus, Mary’s hymn, like Hannah’s before her, extols the loving concern of a God who sees and who provides deliverance through the babe in her womb to all “those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50). Thus we see in the remaining pages of Luke’s Gospel Jesus, this son of God, this son of Mary, as he comes to bring the promised mercy of God. He is invited into the home of Simon the Pharisee, and while he is at table, a sinful, penitent woman bursts onto the scene and begins to wash his feet with her tears. Simon knows “what sort of woman” this is, this sinner who touches him. And Simon is right. She is a sinner, for her sins are many. Yet Jesus proclaims that her sins are forgiven, for she loves much. Thus, out of the gratitude of her life, she washes his feet

with her tears. And we hear Jesus, this son of Mary, say to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” (Luke 7:44). “For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.”

Prior to this scene, Jesus had gone to the city of Nain. As he drew near to the gate of the city, he saw a widow whose only son had died. “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (Luke 7:13). And we see Jesus, this son of Mary, raise this woman’s son from the dead. And all the people glorified God, saying, “God has looked favorably on his people” (Luke 7:16 NRSV). We do not hear their voices, but surely the woman at Simon’s feast and the widow at Nain would have said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . [and] he who is mighty has done great things for me.”

This is the call to ministry. It is born out of a grateful heart that rejoices in the reality that God who is mighty has looked upon us. It springs from a servant’s heart that acknowledges its low estate and expresses the joy that is found in salvation. It flows from the lips of humble men and women who give themselves in service to the will of God and who confess, “Let it be to me according to your will.” It finds its task in the very nature of God himself. It is ministry that springs from a servant’s heart and sees with the eyes of God. Empowered by the mighty God of heaven who has done great things for us, we learn to see the invisible, to hear the silent cries in the night, to feel the tears of loss and shame, to taste the bitterness of reproach in those we see around us. And that call, that vision of clarity, leads us to do great things for others in the name of Jesus. For when we are regarded by one who is powerful, we become powerful.

Thus this virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes a model disciple for us. She readily believed what was spoken to her by the angel, fully embraced the scandal of faith, and submitted her will to the will of God. A servant, she allowed her life to be used by God, to be inhabited by him through the power of the Holy Spirit. And her vision of God allows us to see what God has done for us. And that is our call to ministry. Surely we can say, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . [and] he who is mighty has done great things for me.”

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