

Mary, God-bearer

Luke 1:26-38

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

We, who are not Orthodox or Roman Catholics, have the problem of neglecting Mary. That's not to say we should go the way the Orthodox or Roman Catholics go. Nevertheless, we neglect the importance of Mary. There are three great problems we are confused about because we fail to realize who she really was.

Problem #1. The first great problem that the church had was that since God is one, how could there be one who is the Son of God? Since God is one, any other gods lead to polytheism. The Hebrew people had learned, especially after they were exiled, not to flirt with idols. How could then there be one who is the Son of God? Who is truly God?

There were all kinds of things that people said, such as that Jesus was "a secondary god," or "there was when he was not" (Arius). The early church struggled for three hundred years with this problem and finally in the Nicene Creed confessed that Jesus is "of one substance" with the Father, which really means "of the same substance." Not "of similar substance," not "of like substance," but "the same substance."

Matthew 1:23 states: "His name will be called 'Emmanuel' (which means God with us)." Hebrew names describing what God is doing occur throughout the Bible. This name "Emmanuel" is also used in Isaiah 7:14 for someone who was born within two years of what was being said. "Emmanuel" is no more than "God with us," just as Zechariah means, "God is known."

The early Christians also knew that there was something important at stake here. Jesus must be truly God, or salvation was in danger. The Ecumenical Councils in 325 and 381 established the Nicene Creed: He was not only "God from God," but "Light from Light, true God from true God, of one Being with the Father." That is, "of the same Being," "of the same substance." Even though they knew all about the problem of having only one God, and how God could change, that he is of one Being with the Father was basic.

Then early Christians faced another great problem: Was Jesus truly human? Or did he just seem to be human? They knew all sorts of stories from Greek and Roman mythology of gods and goddesses coming down to earth and having children with human beings. They wondered if Jesus was truly human. Perhaps he just seemed to be that way? No! They came down decisively, confessing that he was truly human. He was born like any other human being, and the woman who bore him was named Mary. The term they used for her was not Mother of God, but "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*).

You and I only have a vague idea of what it was like in the early centuries in these Ecumenical Councils. We who are not Orthodox or Roman Catholic accept the first four Councils. The Orthodox accept the first seven. The Roman Catholics have twenty-one. We think of Councils like business meetings, or meetings of Congress, or some kind of hearing in a legal sense, all using Roberts Rules of Order! In fact, the Councils varied greatly.

The third Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus in 431, was like a huge football game. At our football games we have cheerleaders who lead the fans of one team in cheers while the cheerleaders for the other team lead their side. It was like that at Ephesus, only the cheerleaders then were monks. Some of the cheerleading monks led shouts for the title, "Mother of God," for Mary, emphasizing Jesus' humanity. Other monks led cheers for her as the "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*), emphasizing his divinity. That was the issue: He was truly God; was he truly human? It was a brutal battle. And the decision of the Council was: "Yes! He was truly human, truly one of us, and Mary is *Theotokos*, the God-bearer." That's problem #1.

Problem #2 is illustrated by this quotation from Isaiah 7:14, where in the Hebrew it says: "a young woman shall bear a son." By the time of the New Testament, however, the common language was Greek, it was written in Matt 1:23, here quoting Isaiah 7:14: "A virgin shall bear a son," and in Luke 1:27: "The angel Gabriel was sent by God . . . to a virgin . . . and the virgin's name was Mary."

What is the whole purpose of the virgin birth? What is commonly thought is that it is because he is sinless. In that sense a virgin birth means that he is born without sin. But that is not the reason.

[The same kind of thinking lies behind the infallible decision of Pius IX in 1854 that Mary was born without sin (The Immaculate Conception). The Orthodox do not hold to the Immaculate Conception.]

2 Cor 5:21 reads: "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God became truly incarnate in Jesus Christ, truly one of us. He actually took on our sinful nature (Rom 8:2-4) because he was going to save us. The name that is given him in the text for today is "Jesus," which is a Hebrew name meaning: "He saves." He saves us, as Matt 1:21 states: "You shall call his name Jesus; for he will save his people from their sin."

The whole point of the virgin birth is to point out that this is something **absolutely new!** The Holy God of all not only became human but he died for us (Matt 27:46, Rom 6:23, 1 Cor 15:56; in technical terms, *the communicatio idiomatum, genus majesticum*, Chemnitz.)

How can we understand all this? Remember at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451, the early Christians struggled with how he is human and how is he God at the same

time. They answered that with the famous formula: “unmixed and undivided.” If you try to go beyond that, you’re in trouble. Don’t go there!!! Something that is beyond our categories, beyond our thinking: God became one of us, and the Holy One took on sin and death. He is totally God and totally human and sinful. We cannot, we dare not, try to go beyond that.

Problem #3: The role of Mary. In the first chapter of Luke the angel comes to Mary and informs her of her situation. The lowly estate or station of Mary is emphasized. In the original language it uses the word that is often translated as “slave.” She wasn’t a royal princess. She didn’t have fine robes. She was a lower-class person, and God chose her. God chose this one, not some high-ranking person. She was about fourteen years old. In that day only two percent of the people could read. And she was a woman. Ninety-nine percent of those who could read were male. Only princesses might learn to read. She was not educated. And then she’s engaged, and engagement was much more serious in those days. And she’s pregnant! What a dilemma!

And the angel comes to her and says: “This is of God.” And her answer is: “Let it be to me, according to your word.” That’s beyond all miracle-thinking. Beyond all categories. God gave her faith.

That’s also true for you and me. When Lutheran women in the US celebrated the ten-year anniversary of the ordination of women, they called themselves, “Daughters of the Word.” That’s what we all are. Sons and daughters of the Word.

That is perfectly expressed in infant baptism. Just as God gave faith to this fourteen-year-old, uneducated, maid-servant, Mary, he also gives faith to us in infant Baptism. (Adult Baptism is simply delayed infant Baptism.) He chooses us. He creates faith in us. Luther puts it so well in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit is the One who calls, gathers, enlightens, and **sanctifies.**”

The Lord has chosen us and given us faith. We celebrate that he has not only come to us in our world as the one who changes everything, but also that he comes to us individually in Baptism, and he comes to us in his promise and his reality as we receive the Lord’s Supper. Amen