

Sermon for Advent 4, Year B, December 18, 2011  
Luke 1:26-38

Good Morning!

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

This prayer, known as the “Hail Mary” prayer, is prayed by countless Christian people throughout the world. While we may associate it with the Roman Catholic tradition, there is a Marian Society within the Episcopal Church that actively encourages devotion to Mary. I have met more than a few Episcopalians down through the years who pray the rosary – believing that their intercessions to Mary are heard by her and honored by God.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, the focus shifts to Mary. Over the last three weeks, we have heard scriptural lessons that proclaim Christ’s Second Coming and the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. Now we hear of Mary’s role in God’s plan of salvation.

In our gospel lesson from Luke, we hear the account of the Annunciation – of the angel appearing to Mary and telling her that she is to bear a son whose name will be Jesus. The angel announces to her that her child will be great – in fact he will be called the Son of the Most High. And then, in response to her question about how this can be due to her virginity, the angel tells her that the child will be of the Holy Spirit. And our lesson concludes with Mary saying, “let it be done according to your will.” Biblical scholars will tell us that in all probability, Mary was a young girl – in her early teens at best when this took place.

The virgin birth is not really the focus of what I want to say to you this morning. What I will say is that Christian belief has traditionally maintained that this birth was foretold in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The Septuagint version which is the Old Testament in Greek translates Isaiah 7:14 by saying “the virgin is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” But the older tradition, the Hebrew text translates that verse, “the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name

him Immanuel.” The newer version in Greek refers to a virgin but the older text simply says a young woman. As we know, our Christian tradition has sided with the interpretation that maintains that Mary was a virgin. I am told that the Eastern Orthodox Churches, while believing in Mary’s virginity, place more emphasis upon the tradition of Jesus as the Pre-existent Word of God. In other words, they don’t focus on the conception as the reason for Jesus’ divinity – that it is the Holy Spirit that impregnated Mary. Rather they point to the man Jesus as the earthly incarnation of the Word of God that has existed from all time. Jesus is divine because he is the very Word of God that pre-existed the earthly life of Jesus.

In the end, it is up to each of us to decide where we fall on this matter. The theological truth is that Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God born of Mary. Perhaps if we stick with that, we sidestep all the debate about whether Mary was a virgin or not.

But I believe there is something else that needs to be said about our gospel lesson and the account of the Annunciation. Our lesson ends with Mary readily agreeing to her part in the salvation story. She consents to what the angel has told her. She is willing to bear this child as an unwed early teen age mother. She ran the risk of losing her betrothal, of bringing shame upon her family, and possibly death by stoning. Because of her willingness to risk, she is considered to be the very model of obedience to God. She doesn’t hesitate to go along with what God is seeking to do. And for that reason, Christian writers have described her as a symbol of the Church. We, as the community of faith, are to do what Mary did and consent to what God is seeking to do through us. We, too, are to be obedient and faithful to God’s intentions.

In addition to the role of faith, Mary is referred to as the Mother of God. In the Eastern Church, she is described as “theotokos” or God – bearer - the one who is pregnant with God. And like Mary, we as individuals and we as a community of faith are to imitate Mary by being God-bearers to the world. We, too, are to be pregnant with God. In the words of the “Hail Mary” prayer, just as Mary was filled with grace, so, we, too, are to be bearers of God’s grace in the world.

In the history of Christian spirituality, there is a tradition that maintains that the goal of the Christian life is to achieve union with God. Christian mystics and saints down through the ages have pursued this goal through the

disciplines of silence, and solitude, and prayer of the heart. They believed that there was a stripping away of a false self – an ego-centered existence – over time through a disciplined life of prayer. Through the gradual dismantling of this false self, the person would achieve union with God. They would, in the end, identify with Mary as persons who were truly filled with grace, pregnant with God, and that this presence within would be unmistakable.

I share this belief that the goal of the Christian life is union with God. But what I would like to say is this: you and I are already in union with God by virtue of our baptism. We are already pregnant with God. In Romans 6, St. Paul tells us that in baptism we are united with Christ through his death and resurrection. Paul believed that when a person is baptized, they are brought into union with God. I would even go further by saying that every human being is in union with God by virtue of our humanity. This union is given to every human being from the beginning. Baptism simply pronounces a loud “amen” to what God has done and is doing with that person’s life. The point of the Christian life, however, is to assist us to consciously realize that baptismal union. The whole point of prayer, of sacraments, of community and so on, is to bring us into a permanent awareness that we are already there! We are already in union with God. I remember Thomas Merton once writing that one of the great tragedies is that all of us are walking around glowing like the sun, glowing with the presence of God in and through us, and we don’t realize it. We don’t realize that we are pregnant with God. We don’t understand that we are already God-bearers. There is a little bit, perhaps a whole lot of Mary in each of us. The task of the Christian life is to bring us into that waking, conscious realization and awareness that we are already there. This gospel lesson is not only about Mary, it’s about us as well.

For those who pray the “Hail Mary” prayer, they are praying about themselves and what they are destined for. Our destiny which is with us right now, is to be God-bearers, people pregnant with God.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of the womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the time of our death.