

SPG#190, ADVENT 4B

December 21, 2008

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

In the gospel for today we encounter one of the more prominent personages in all of scripture, the Virgin Mary. I recall as a boy seeing her depicted in our manger scene at home with a navy blue robe and a white head scarf. She was always in the kneeling position with her head tilted slightly downward, presumably looking at the baby Jesus.

In those days she was always depicted as caucasian. And I learned that she was incredibly gentle. I recall singing the hymn, "Gentle Mary Laid her Child Lowly in a Manger." I knew from my own experience that there were some Moms who were extremely gentle and motherly. But I figured the Virgin Mary must have been at the top of the list. I mean she would have to be a super Mom to be the mother of Jesus, right? You know, the kind of Mom who never utters a cross word, who is always there to listen, who is the nerve center of a spotless house, and who is always impeccably dressed. In the verses following today's gospel Mary is reported as pondering in her heart about the different visitors to the manger. It was not that she was just thinking or reflecting. She was pondering. And that word ponder made a deep impression on me. And I could just see Mary in her blue chasuble, with her head tilted, just pondering away.

It seems that the Virgin Mary can be experienced on different levels and in different ways. In recent years there have been reports of visions of the Virgin Mary. One of the more prominent ones has a statue of Mary crying tears of blood.

In the larger Church Others, such as our friends in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there has been an inclination toward a serious perception of Mary as Theotokos, the God bearer, Mother of God. And their liturgical celebrations reflect that.

In the Episcopal Church one can find that emphasis as well as the view that she was just one of several major characters in and around the birth.

In our own culture, in the not very distant past, Mary had become one of those feminine icons who depicted civility and gentleness, and yes even passivity. And it was expected out of that image that women should not vote. They should not voice opinions, should not be physically strong and athletic, and should not be in charge of anything in the world such as business or even the church. In the contrasting current day we are still living into a much more dynamic perception of women.

And we find ourselves in a different and relatively new world in regard to the perception of women. And I for one can sense the spiritual power and the spiritual health for all of us as we continue to promote and enhance clarity and freedom in both genders.

And I am in hopes that that same spiritual power will give us a more dynamic understanding of the Virgin Mary this year.

In today's gospel the angel Gabriel has visited Mary in the town of Nazareth.

After greeting her as favored by God he informs her that she will conceive in her womb and bear a son, and will name him Jesus.

Gabriel said, “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.” Mary understandably is incredulous. She says, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” Gabriel tells her that Elizabeth, who will give birth to John the Baptizer, has also conceived in old age. Then Mary responds by saying, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

And so the gospel today records an astonishing event, the announcing to Mary of her coming pregnancy and the birth of Jesus. But beyond the recording of this amazing conversation the thing that is most prominent is what is not said about the Virgin Mary. There is no mention of her physical appearance. In general I think that people would like to think that she appeared attractive in some form or fashion. But in essence we do not know. Also in regard to temperament we are left to speculate. Was she gregarious and outspoken among women of her day, or was she more reserved and quiet?

Would she have been known as a person who was especially devoted in Judaism?

There has been a multitude of speculation on personal attributes, physical and otherwise over the centuries. And many of these are preserved in art forms.

But largely we do not know much about her personal attributes.

And so it may seem that we just cannot know much about her as a person, and that we will need to get used to seeing her depicted in speculative art.

I think it is helpful to compare her to other figures in the scripture who were captivated by a call from God, such as John the Baptizer, who was called to prepare the way for Jesus, to be the forerunner. There are a few scholars who maintain that Mary and John were actually the first disciples, called by God through to perform specific tasks, forerunning and mothering the Son of God.

In addition our society has an appreciation of women as persons that is unprecedented in recorded history. We still have a long way to go with that. But where we are is unprecedented. Does this mean that we are better equipped to sense who the Virgin Mary was as a person? Are we able via the scripture to have a better appreciation of her as a person? Perhaps.

I can truly say that in the eyes of my mind and heart I can see her as a shadowy figure. I am not able to make out her facial features. She still has that blue chasuble on and the white head scarf. And I can honestly say that I have stopped comparing her to other public figures. And I think our imaginations are an important part of our stretching to see her.

But even as we stretch it is crucial to realize that she has an importance that is beyond her personal attributes. Gabriel indicates her importance when he tells us that she was favored by God. He indicates her importance when he says that she will bear the Son of God, even as a virgin.

And finally her importance is indicated by her response, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Her importance is seen in her servanthood, in her willingness to be the bearer of a miracle. And so she is known for her willingness to provide a certain kind of service. Her service would be a bearing and a birth and the mothering that went with it.

And yet her service would not be about achievement and accomplishment. It would be about childbearing and birth and mothering. And so it is that she is practically invisible as a person. But she towers over history as a servant. When the opportunity for service appeared she said yes.

As an icon of service to God she is instructive for us in the 21st century.

We may or may not be visited by angels. But if we follow Christ then opportunities for service are presented. And sometimes that service is better seen as something to bear for a period of time than as some remarkable achievement. There are many here at St. Paul’s who bear responsibilities consistently and quietly. They teach. They organize. They make phone calls. They sit in meetings. They write checks. They perform menial tasks. They are the human backbone of this church. Most of their work is not publicized. In the best tradition of the Virgin Mary they are our quiet servants. When an opportunity for service appeared they said yes.

And it is our hope to attract more of such people, more people who will become part of the backbone of this church, more people who will be like the Virgin Mary.

And if we look in the right places and in the right way they will be easy to recognize.

Most will not be prominent as persons. But they will tower in the church as servants.

It may be that in our time as we live into more personhood for women and men alike that we will come into a new appreciation of the Virgin Mary and her life as a person.

And via the Virgin Mary we see the awesome responsibility of bearing Christ in this world and in this church. And we see and appreciate her quiet example of willingness and service. I believe that Mary saw herself and her role clearer and clearer as she lived into her service as mother of the Son of God. And as we say yes to the quiet immensity of service in Christ, of service in the Church we will see ourselves and our particular service clearer.

May the vision of the Virgin Mary become clearer in our hearts and in our minds than ever before. May she be a shining example and a guide in our lives of discovery and service. And in that example may we have a clearer vision of who we are as persons and what our service is to be. Amen.