

A Place for Mary in Protestant Preaching?

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Should Protestants preach about Mary? The answer reflected in the actual practice of most Protestant ministers seems to be negative, especially if we look beyond the weeks of Advent and Christmas. Having identified Mary with the distinguishing characteristics of Roman Catholicism, Protestants seem to be content to say only what they do *not* believe about Mary rather than what they do believe. Even if many traditions about Mary stem from early church tradition that is the common heritage of all Christians, those same traditions nevertheless strike many Protestants as quite foreign.

Feminist exegesis has labored to recover the place of women in the story of Israel and in the emerging early church, but even there Mary has received relatively little attention. At first glance, especially in light of Marian theology within Roman Catholicism, Mary strikes many readers as an utterly passive figure, whose life is ruled by God's decision and not by any plan or intention of her own. In Matthew and even in Luke, where the birth narrative frequently makes reference to Mary, she is a character with only one dimension. Only her role as mother emerges as having any significance. While both of these characterizations of Mary are accurate, they both miss something essential to the gospel narratives. For Matthew and Luke, as for other early Christian writers, the human beings involved in their stories are virtually *all* passive recipients of God's action upon them. Likewise, the human characters *all* enter the story with a single dimension. If Mary is the passive maternal figure, Peter also is passive, the apostle whom God must direct from place to place. The passivity of Mary, and the severe restriction of her role, is the rule for gospel characters rather than the exception.

Based on the slender set of gospel texts in which she appears, I want to suggest four themes that both arise from the portrait of Mary within the text and are appropriate—even powerful—for preaching. Of course, the result is not preaching *about Mary*, but preaching the gospel as reflected within a particular text. Neither would I recommend preaching *about* Peter or Paul, but sermons often do *focus* on an event connected with some human being. I hope to show that the Protestant reluctance even to focus on Mary robs preaching of some excellent opportunities.

1. Mary and God's Grace

The first theme emerges primarily in the context of the Lukan infancy narrative, and that is the theme of grace. Of course, the word "grace" itself

stands behind the NRSV's translation of Gabriel's initial words to Mary in Luke 1:28 and 30:

"Greetings, favored [lit. graced] one! The Lord is with you."

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor [lit. grace] with God."

What Gabriel announces to Mary concerns God's son and his future greatness, but the fact that this child will be Mary's own is characterized as an act of grace.

On what basis has Mary been selected for this act of grace? Here traditional Christian teaching about the innocence of Mary needs to yield to the silence of the text. What is striking in Luke's account, in fact, is how very little information the narrative betrays concerning Mary. When Zechariah and Elizabeth enter the story at 1:5, we learn that Zechariah is a priest from the order of Abijah and that Elizabeth is from Aaron's family line. Both are described as righteous and faithful individuals, advanced in years, and childless. By contrast, Mary, who is to become the mother of Jesus Christ, enters the story simply as "a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." This description says nothing of Mary's own family line; neither does the narrative ever describe Joseph beyond these meager words. More important, nothing in the text reveals anything about Mary's own characteristics. Is she, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, righteous and faithful? Does she fear God and live by the law? Not a word answers these questions.

In the instance of Mary, we find a concrete example of the workings of God's grace. "You have found favor with God," Gabriel announces to one who has no apparent qualifications for that gift. The text gives no indication that Mary seeks or deserves the grace granted to her. In fact, her initial perplexity and fear (conventional biblical response to the presence of a divine messenger) allows for the suspicion that this act of grace may not even have been welcome. Luke's silence regarding Mary's parents and her treatment by Joseph begs the question of how this "grace" on God's part will affect her life.

What is the appropriate response to grace? According to Luke's narrative, Mary first asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Within Christian tradition, this question has taken on a heavy theological burden. In the narrative itself, however, the question clearly serves the function of inviting Gabriel to expand his announcement, as he does in vv. 35-37. Mary then says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." With this simple and direct statement, Mary consents to the pronouncement that has been made. The lines of the Magnificat move beyond this consent to the powerful language of thanksgiving, praise, and even prophecy. Nevertheless, the first word of Mary is a word of consent.

This episode has as its center the action of God in the gift of Jesus Christ, not the character or life of Mary. Within that larger framework, however, the experience of Mary provides preachers with an elegant occasion for proclaiming the grace of God. As Karl Barth rightly observed, the birth narratives speak "of grace and of grace alone" (*Church Dogmatics*, I/2, p. 188). The story, utterly familiar and predictable, becomes fresh by the light of the question of the workings of grace.

2. *The Vulnerability of Mary*

A second theme that arises from the stories that involve Mary concerns her vulnerability and that of her son. Luke hints at that vulnerability with the refrain that Mary “treasured” and “pondered” the events surrounding Jesus’ birth (2:19, 51). Simeon’s canticle, with its statement to Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul too,” strongly suggests that Mary’s vulnerability goes even beyond the vulnerability that is normal for all mothers. John’s fleeting reference to Mary standing at the cross (John 19:25) again summons up her vulnerability. In all of these instances, of course, the vulnerability of Mary is largely of an emotional sort, for the stories hint at events that lie ahead, events that inevitably rupture the life of this mother.

Matthew’s narrative of the birth of Jesus reflects a different sort of vulnerability in connection with Mary. Immediately following the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew describes Joseph’s response to the news that his betrothed, Mary, was already pregnant. While the narrator, anticipating what lies ahead, explains to the reader that Mary’s child is “from the Holy Spirit,” Joseph is not privy to this secret and decides to “dismiss her quietly.” At that instant, the character of Mary’s life, and that of her unborn child, stand under a threat that modern readers find almost unimaginable. Despite the fact that Joseph was a “righteous man,” and despite the fact that he is exerting a lenient option with Mary, even this lenient action threatens her with utter shame and disgrace. Like the four women mentioned in the genealogy, Mary’s situation is suddenly extremely precarious. Marriage to Joseph and the safe delivery of her son do not remove this threat from Mary. She appears in Matthew 2 *only* in connection with Jesus and specifically in connection with the threat posed to him by Herod.

In a never-ending stream of sermons on texts from the Pauline letters or from the book of Acts, preachers extol the virtues of early Christian apostles and teachers. The opposition that the gospel always encounters finds its “heroes” in men who are made vulnerable to persecution and death. Mary offers no less an opportunity for reflecting on the countless ways in which the gospel is threatened. Matthew’s version of Jesus’ genealogy demonstrates that the line of David is threatened over and over again and is continued in unlikely and even scandalous ways. The story of Jesus’ birth continues that line of scandal and threat.

3. *Mary’s Inability to Comprehend*

A third theme that preachers might explore in connection with Mary is the theme of her inability to comprehend Jesus. Readers of the gospels often conclude from the annunciation to Mary in Luke 1 that she must have understood Jesus and his role fully even before his birth. Gabriel plainly told her that her child would be called “Son of God,” and nothing after that event should have come as a surprise. Even the astonishing exchange between Jesus and his mother in John 2, when Jesus rebukes her for reporting that the wedding guests had exhausted the supply of wine, is explained by the assumption

that Mary already knew what Jesus would do.

Apart from this one scene in John, only Luke narrates words spoken by Mary or ascribes to her any thoughts. These very thoughts and statements contradict the notion that Mary understood the words of Gabriel. Immediately after the annunciation, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and there exclaims the words of the Magnificat. With this outburst of praise, she takes on a prophetic role and seems to reinforce the impression left by her words of quiet consent in 1:38. However, this prophetic role vanishes with the birth itself. The shepherds' visit leaves everyone amazed, but Mary, according to Luke, "kept all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). When Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Jerusalem and there encounter Simeon and his oracles concerning Jesus, the narrator explains that "the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him."

Taken by themselves, these references may indicate simply that Mary stores up these events which she finds consistent with her expectations. More difficult to explain in this way is the closing scene in the birth narrative, 2:41-52, when the twelve year old Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem after his parents have left for home. Having searched for Jesus for three days, Mary and Joseph find him in the temple. It is Mary who asks, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (2:48). Jesus' question in response results in further confusion: "But they did not understand what he said to them." The narrative closes on the note that Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents, but "his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51).

Whatever knowledge Gabriel's annunciation imparts to the reader of Luke's gospel, it does not leave Mary with an understanding of her son and his role. While the temple scene at the end of chapter 2 may have arisen out of popular interest in the boyhood of Jesus, one of its functions within Luke is to suggest that not even Mary comprehends who Jesus is. The notes that she "treasured all these things" and "pondered them in her heart" (2:19, 51) recall scenes from the Hebrew Bible, when a character is said to be perplexed or to ponder over what has occurred (see Genesis 37:11; Daniel 7:15, 28; 8:27).

Luke portrays Mary, not as some paragon of understanding, who deduces a full-blown christology from the words of Gabriel, but as a human being, who cannot comprehend the events that are unfolding before her. In that sense, she pre-figures the vast majority of characters throughout the gospels, who have no categories with which to interpret Jesus. She also, of course, pre-figures all believers who assert their consent to things that lie well beyond their powers of understanding.

4. The Presence of Mary

Two New Testament scenes, strikingly different from one another, refer to the presence of Mary. In the Johannine crucifixion, his mother stands near the cross, accompanied by two other women and the "beloved disciple" (John 19:25-27). When Luke describes the gathering of the Jesus' followers after his ascension, he lists the apostles who were joined by "certain women, including

Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). The reference in Acts primarily ensures that the emerging church includes members of Jesus' own family. While the scene in John's gospel has been the object of a multitude of highly symbolic and sometimes highly questionable interpretations, one clear implication is that Jesus gives up, or is robbed of, all earthly connections—including family.

In both these scenes, and especially in the Johannine crucifixion, the presence of Mary allows readers to imagine and identify with her pain and grief. The familiar tradition of the *mater dolorosa* has produced for the church great art and music, if it has also sometimes made Mary's grief a matter for pious emotional excess. Those excesses need to be attended to, but they should not prevent preachers from seeing in Mary's action a form of faithfulness. Neither grief nor rage nor shame prevents Mary from standing near the cross. By contrast with Peter, who denies being an associate of Jesus, Mary and her companions stand by. Powerless to do anything to alter events, they are nevertheless present.

Conclusion

These four suggestions by no means exhaust the possibilities available for preaching "about" Mary. What unifies these four is the theological assumption that there is a commonality between Mary and other believers. That assumption is also one of the hallmarks of post-Vatican II Catholic theology regarding Mary. Where earlier generations thought of Mary as aligned with Jesus, even as co-redemptor with him, Vatican II focused on Mary's role of standing *with* the church. As a member of the church, Mary is identified more closely with the church and with human beings. On this view of Mary, Christians see in her a person with their own grave limitations, even as they see in her also the incomprehensible event of the incarnation.

NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of the Bible in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

This essay draws on my work-in-progress, "Mary: The Mother of Jesus," which is to be published by the University of South Carolina Press.