

Mary's Confession – Our Confession

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for our meditation this morning is from the Gospel lesson, Luke chapter one.

Today our attention is directed toward someone who is, perhaps, the most misunderstood person in all of Holy Writ – and unless you are reciting the Apostle's or Nicene Creed, the very mention of her name, is enough to make some Christians – even some Lutherans – squirm uneasily in their seats. I refer, of course, to the blessed mother of our Lord, the Virgin Mary.

Quite often, if you hear a message about Mary, it will fall into one of three categories:

“The Gloriously High and Mighty Mary”, which is, as you might expect, the voice of our Roman Catholic friends. “The Feminist Mary” – that would be the voices of those who portray Mary as a New Testament pioneer of feminism, the strong woman who bravely stood in the face of being pregnant out of wedlock in an oppressive, male-dominated society.

Then there's what I call “The Invisible Mary” – which is a bit of a misnomer. This refers to the many Protestant churches who simply won't give a message about Mary. It is rather unfortunate that so many churches have fallen into this syndrome. The “Invisible Mary” is where the Blessed Virgin is relegated to a footnote in the story of Jesus. She is given a polite, patronizing pat on the head, acknowledging she was a “special woman”, but that's about all that needs to be said – in fact the less that is said about her, the better. Mary doesn't really exist anymore. She's irrelevant. She's in heaven now. End of story.

Now, I'll grant you that making Mary “bigger than life” or painting her with a very hip, modern brush like a Time magazine article, or History Channel documentary is not helpful nor is it accurate. But so is giving Mary the “short shrift” – that too, is misguided. In fairness, part of this is due to uncertainty. Many Lutherans and Protestants simply don't know what to do with Mary. Yes, she was highly esteemed, and yes she showed great courage in the face of a very troubling situation... and no, we Lutherans and other Protestants do not worship or pray to Mary.

Well, if a message about the Virgin Mary makes you uncomfortable, allow me to put your mind at ease. While Mary is certainly the key player in today's Gospel lesson... it really isn't about her. You see, every person, every event, every sentence that appears in holy writ has something important to teach us – because, **all** scripture points us to Jesus. Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth are the orators – but not the subject. Mary is delivering something special to the house of Zechariah and Elisabeth. Mary is making a declaration or a confession. For that reason, I submit a fourth category for messages about the Virgin Mary: Not the Gloriously High and Mighty Mary, not the Feminist Mary, and certainly not the Invisible Mary. How about: The Confessing Mary! And as we also will see....by God's grace, MARY'S CONFESSION IS OUR CONFESSION! But because the “Invisible Mary” syndrome is so common outside of Roman Catholicism, a few words to clarify who Mary is, might still be in order, and to do that I will digress for just a moment and we'll look at an Old Testament reference for comparison.

Try to imagine a God-fearing Jew ignoring or downplaying the significance of the Ark of the Covenant! That's pretty hard to do! Ridiculous! The Ark of the Covenant was sacred... not because of how it was made, or what it was made of... but because of what it contained.... because it represented the presence of God. I will never forget a remarkable observation one of my professors pointed out to me back at the seminary.

In a very real sense, Mary was the Ark of the New Covenant. There are contrasts to take note of... reversals, perhaps. And parallels as well.

The ark of the Old Covenant was a large wooden vessel. Mary – a living, breathing vessel of human flesh. The ark of the covenant was overladen with pure gold, beautiful and very ornate... replete with images of angels, worshiping the presence of God. The ark of new covenant – Mary....she was

attired not in fancy, ornate garments, but in the humble clothing of a servant girl. The ark of the Old Covenant which contained God's Word – the 10 Commandments – carved on tablets of stone, and was designed to move about. It sometimes traveled from place to place. Mary was traveling to pay someone a visit, carrying within her, God's Word... incarnate in human flesh... the promise of hope, joy and salvation. This movement of Mary's is foreshadowing the movement of the God-Man, Christ Jesus, whom she will soon bring forth. And this “movement” should not surprise anyone... Isn't that what her Son would do? Proclaiming the Gospel... Mary experienced Advent up close and in person. She is the first believer! The Word of God came to her through the angel, and she believed. Likewise, whenever Jesus comes, things happen. God's Word is proclaimed – He creates and builds faith. This is exactly what happens when Mary, who is carrying the unborn Christ Child, arrives at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Yes, Elizabeth is rejoicing (quite loudly, we're told). And what is the reason of her very loud rejoicing? Is she just “oh so very, very happy” to see her cousin Mary, or is this a joyful expression of camaraderie between two pregnant women? An “extra holy” baby shower? Hardly. Elizabeth's rejoicing is not so much about Mary – as it is about being in the presence of the Lord Jesus. Elizabeth's rejoicing is coupled with faith... a gracious gift of the Lord – and this faith – brought about by a sudden infilling of the Holy Spirit is the only way she could know about the One carried in Mary's womb. Likewise, Baby John's leap in the womb is not simply because of Mary's voice. Like David who leaped and danced before the ark of the Covenant – the presence of the Lord – Baby John, leaps before His Lord!

By the way, John's leap in the womb should lay to rest all doubts that any baby – born or unborn, is capable of hearing, trusting, and receiving the marvelous gift of faith from our Lord Jesus.

Dear brothers and sister in Christ, the point of our Gospel lesson is that the presence of the Lord always brings good things to us. That is the promise of Advent – that the Lord is coming to us.

Yes, we know that the Church anxiously awaits His return on the last day. But Jesus still comes to us...today! He still brings us good things... He brings us his promise of forgiveness of sins in his Sacraments of baptism... and in His Holy Supper. He brings us His comforting message of hope and peace found in his Gospel, that God would send to us a Savior and would save His people from their sins by dying on the cross for you and for me. God is never bound by Jesus' or John physical maturity for His Word to be spoken. Think of it... even while in the womb, Jesus still came to Zechariah and Elizabeth's house that day! And the words of Mary's confession on that day was God's Word.

She declares (actually she sings) **“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”** That Word was not just for Elizabeth's ears... but for our ears as well. MARY'S CONFESSION... IS OUR CONFESSION! Each and every day... each and every time we gather in this place... each and every time we confess our sins, we rejoice in the gracious work of God. Mary reminds us of the promise of God through the prophet Micah how the Lord has looked upon our humble state:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot [and will] cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Now, Mary does not deny that she is blessed. Doing so would be false humility... if she were to do that she would be calling God's Word spoken to her a lie! The words of the angel Gabriel to her – undoubtedly were still ringing in her ears: **“Hail favored one... the Lord is with you!”**

So, rather than deny, what does Mary do? She magnifies the Lord... she praises Him! She does not magnify herself or try to credit anything she did to her deeds, her abilities or her accomplishments. By elevating God and what He has done, she humbles herself. God's Word spoken through Mary speaks to all of us in our self-seeking arrogance and she proceeds to give us a lesson in what real humility looks

like. No matter what kind of pious airs we try to put on to impress our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, when comes right down to it, God sees right through our pretending. We may think we can hide it from those people, but our self-righteous hearts are fully known by Him. We are no different than the Pharisee Jesus spoke of who prayed to God, "I thank you Lord that I am not like other people... especially that tax collector over there." We may not say such things outwardly, but that's what our hearts are like. We think we're really something, but the truth is we have so much less to boast of than Mary, the handmaiden of the Lord.

It is interesting to consider why Mary boldly proclaims that **"He who is mighty has done great things for me..."** What "great things" might this be? A life of ease or riches? Fame and prestige? A long pedigree of accomplishments? Not by being poor... Not by being married to a carpenter. Not with the stigma of carrying a baby out of wedlock hanging over her head. Yet Mary does not focus on her circumstances or her poverty. She is, by no means, perfect or without sin. Like us, her faith will be tested. But despite her circumstances, in today's lesson, we see a woman who is not short-sighted... through God's gracious gift of faith; she still "sees" the great things God has done for her and for us. She believes... She is looking forward – as she looks to the fulfillment of God's promise to save her and all mankind. She believes that the Savior has come. But again the words of God's handmaiden speak to us, saying: **He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones**

If we try to put ourselves in Mary and Joseph's shoes, I shudder to think how any of us – myself included – would have handled it. Not only do we kid ourselves at how good we think we are at covering up our sin... We stroke our pride about ourselves and our children and grandchildren every chance we get. And just when we think we've got it all together, and just when we think we're doing a pretty good thing for our families, or for our boss, something happens: a serious illness or injury... we get downsized at work ... or we stagger emotionally in the aftermath of national tragedy where many precious children will be sadly missed. Some of us here have suffered personal loss a loved one. We are reminded of that loss by the empty chair at the family Christmas gathering. For perhaps many of us, there are enough troubles going on that might make our Christmas seem pretty dismal, at least by outward appearances. Yes, these things do have a way of knocking us off of our thrones, don't they?

But beloved, as we reel in the midst of the messes we make for ourselves, or in the messes that the world has dished up for us... in the middle of our trials, the word of God still speaks to us. Like Elizabeth, we are awestruck that God's faithfulness and mercy should come to us. Yes, despite our sins which are many... despite our feeble works and our modern day idols which leave us barren and yearning, despite our utter brokenness and pain – Jesus the Savior still comes to us and shows us the strength of His arms... The strength of His arms that will carry our sins and the sins of the whole world. And yet those arms, in His humility, would be stretched upon a cross. Meditate on this text again, dear friends, and see that MARY'S CONFESSION IS... OUR CONFESSION.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Though we deserve to be scattered like dust The Lord graciously gathers us to come together to this place – just as we are – in our brokenness, confessing our sinful pride. Though we deserve every pang of pain in our tortured minds and in our broken bodies and famished souls. Though we justly deserve to be sent away empty handed, He still comes to us, offering the free gift of eternal life that He won for each of us on the cross. As He was exalted by rising from the dead, He exhorts us, bringing us newness of life through baptism. That he might fill our hungry souls with every good gift. The free gift of eternal life and peace. For you. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding... keep your hearts and minds on the coming and risen Christ Jesus. Amen.