

The Sunday before Christmas is traditionally the Sunday in church when we especially remember *Mary*, the mother of Jesus. So I want to talk about *Mary* this morning...share some personal reflections that I hope will be familiar to parents... and then I'll talk about how the birth of *Jesus* mirrors some of our experience of children coming into the world...and then takes it to another level.

+

My experience in Church of *Mary*, the mother of Jesus, has covered a lot of territory over the course of my lifetime.

I began in a Methodist church experience which--typical of most Protestantism--hardly ever mentioned *Mary*, except when we said the Apostles' Creed every Sunday in the Methodist version of Morning Prayer...and then of course we heard more about her at Christmastime.

My experience of *Mary* did not change all that much...all the years after...until much later...when I was in my forties...and preparing to be ordained a priest...at *St. Mary's Episcopal Church*...in Asheville NC. And true to her name, *St. Mary's Church* had a longstanding practice of honoring *Mary*. So, every Sunday in the principal Eucharist, I the Curate, would follow Fr. Bennett the Rector, and we would step down out of the sanctuary, to a place over by the wall of the lectern side of the nave [>], *where there...there was a candlelit shrine for Mary*. And there, at the end of each service, we would say the *Angelus*...which is an old prayer in the Catholic tradition that includes...three *Hail Marys*...and then ends with a prayer honoring the incarnation of God in Christ.

That kind of praying in honor of *Mary* was new to my experience-- even within the Episcopal Church. But it was the beginning of me seeking more understanding of the significant place of *Mary* in the Christian story and Christian worship.

And here we are at Grace Church, where Christians of both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds gather in our "common prayer" to God. Some of you notice the naming of *Mary* in our worship more than others, depending on your background. But *Mary* is always named here, at least once every Sunday. And today, in the Gospel of Luke, we hear more of *Mary*, as it is told of her being visited by her relative Elizabeth...who each in their pregnancies...are full of anticipation for their children to come...and *who both say the most remarkable things*.

+

Hearing Elizabeth and *Mary* speak again today...has led me to spend some time...remembering...what it was like when I was anticipating...the birth of my son...some twenty-nine years ago. And I can recall that it was a heady mix...of *joy*...and *fear*. Sometimes my fears led the way—all the practical questions of being ready to have a child...and wondering if I would be a good father...and anticipating so many big changes to come.

As it turned out...it was mostly *after* Ian's birth...that I began to live into...more of the reality of the *blessing* of my son. And as time has passed...my sense of that blessing has grown.

Such a sense of blessing was clear to Elizabeth and *Mary* right from the beginning...and even before their children were born. It is named in the Gospel of Luke...which is then reflected in the first part of the *Hail Mary* from the Catholic tradition...which can invite us to stand alongside Elizabeth...speaking to *Mary*:

Hail *Mary*, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women and *blessed* is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

+

And then, if you know the *Hail Mary*...then you know that there is a second sentence to that prayer. And it can feel like quite a sudden shift...and discordant...with the sense of blessing for Jesus' birth...

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us *sinner*s now...and at the hour of our death. Amen.

And yet, as parents, to shift from our sense of being blessed...to an awareness of our sin...is...come to think of it...also part of our experience...as parents! It can range from...the milder forms of our cluelessness and mistakes as parents...to the less-than-mild. And this awareness of sin can include a question that we can awaken to...that we can feel in our gut like never before: *Will this blessed child...be okay in this world...given the way the world can be?*

The birth of every child...effectively *judges the world*. There is nothing like loving a child...to awaken us...to just how inhospitable the world can be. Our beloved children are not only born into a world where "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" still exists... and now also the newer equivalents of "Ms. Rachel"...and "Bluey". But the very gift and vulnerability of every child born into this world...*is a judgment upon this world...which in all its troubles...puts our beloved children at risk.*

This was doubly-so for the one child, Jesus, Mary's son. As Christians have come to believe, Jesus came as a *blessing* to the world. And at the same time, Mary could see that his coming to us, in all the vulnerability as a child...also judges the world...for the many ways it can be inhospitable...not only to children...and us...but to *God*...the Creator and Father. As we will hear in the testimony of John the Evangelist next Sunday: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world...He was in the world...and yet the world did not know him..." (John 1)

+

Elizabeth and Mary...were in so many ways...*parents*...just as we can be parents among parents...full of blessing...and fears...for our children.

But Elizabeth and Mary were also...unexpectedly...*prophets*. They could see how the *love of God* for this world...at the same time *judges* this world...our world that so often makes true love...so very vulnerable.

+

Therein lies our continuing Advent *longing*...that we...and our world...should be...*must be*...better than we are...for our children's sake...and for God's sake.

And therein too lies our *hope*. *For it is because of this one child, born of Mary, from God*...that we ourselves...our children...and the world...can hope to be saved.

+

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. Amen.