

“Mother Mary”

The Magnificat – Luke 1:38-56 ¹

I don't know how it is for my friends who also stand before congregations today, but for me, Mothers' Day is one of the most difficult days of the year on which to dare to speak. For one thing, I'm obviously *not* a mother, so I'm in water over my head before I open my mouth at all!

But the challenge is much deeper than that. On the one hand, I want to lift up and honor the role of motherhood, as is certainly warranted and too infrequently done; on the other, my life as a pastor and chaplain has taught me that while Mothers' Day represents all that is warm and wonderful to many of us, this day also focuses a searchlight on the deepest pain and disappointment of others.

I expect that some of the women here today sit with tense muscles and upset stomachs, wanting to be here and yet not wanting to be as well. There are probably some women who chose not to come today at all . . . and we can guess some of their reasons. While most of what we do today celebrates things “warm and wonderful,” some of us have lost our mothers this year, and some of us have lost our children. For some of us, the word “mother” represents addiction, abuse, or neglect. For others, “mother” represents the inability to conceive, pregnancies that ended in heartbreak, broken engagements, or divorce.

It was of these things that Jenell Paris was thinking when she wrote, “So let's be gentle with each other this Mothers' Day. Let's celebrate with the women who have happy families. But let's also remember the women and men, girls and boys who are hurt by their mothers. Let's remember the mothers who have lost their children. Let's remember the women who long to be wives and mothers, but aren't. Let's come together and worship Jesus alone, not idealized images of our mothers or ourselves.”² And so, with such gentleness in our minds and hearts, I invite you to turn your attention to the adventure of becoming a mother—of giving birth to children.

Have you ever wondered why couples have children? In earlier years, couples had children in order to have more hands to help on the farm or as insurance policies for their old age. But because the economics of having children have now become inverted, I doubt that these are common motivations for childbearing any longer—at least in developed nations.

For my part, I credit the “maternal urge” not so much to biology as to the image of God in us: God intends for us to bear children. Genesis 1:28 records that “*God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’*” So when you and I bear children in the context of marriage, we're literally doing what God has told us to do, participating in the continuing miracle of birthing persons created in God's own Image.

When our love for each other as husband and wife becomes so rich and so great and so wonderful that it overflows into a desire for children with whom we can share our love, we participate in the very same dynamic by which Creation itself was birthed out of the Love and Character of God. And so choosing to become parents can be a profound affirmation of our personal faith in God.

At the same time, you may have noticed that it takes quite a lot of faith to choose to become a parent. And because of that, some couples say, “Well, we're not going to have children. We're not going to bring children into a world like this. This is awful.” And while there's no denying that we do live in a crooked and perverse generation, I'm afraid that the truth

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on May 12, 2013, Mothers' Day.

² Jenell Williams Paris, “When Mother's Day is Hard” (5.1.04).

of the matter is that every generation has been largely crooked and perverse, since the very beginning of our race.

While the world may indeed be in a sorry state, for those who are in Christ, the future of creation is not at all uncertain. The future lies in God's hands, and moves toward God's goals, as it always has, and always will, and those parents who place their trust in God can raise their children in glad confidence about the future!

I've called this sermon "Mother Mary," and some of you have probably been wondering, "What's up with that?" I suspect that for some of us, those words conjure up thoughts about how some faith groups regard Mary, the mother of Jesus. And I am indeed going to talk about Jesus' mother, but not as some of our friends do. I'm going to talk about her as an ordinary person whose life as a woman and as a mother had a lot in common with our own.

For starters, it seems clear that Mary's own mother and father loved the Lord and taught her about God's faithfulness to and interaction with Israel across the centuries, including the expectation of a coming Messiah. Had this not been the case, Mary would probably have written off her encounter with the angel Gabriel as a hallucination, and she would have been extremely unlikely to have agreed to cooperate with God in the unique way Gabriel proposed.

And today, even as long ago, it continues to be extremely important that we teach our children that the unseen world is real, and that we help them learn to recognize the still, small Voice of God (1 Samuel 3; 1 Kings 19:9-14). Mary had learned these things, and when the crucial time came, she agreed to participate in God's plan (Luke 1:38).

While you and I may not receive such dramatic messages from God, God is always speaking to us, inviting us to participate in pushing back the Darkness and transforming the world. We will miss the greatest adventures of life if we choose not to listen to that Voice.

Of course, Mary's agreement immediately led to a HUGE problem. While Mary was not pregnant because of immoral behavior, she was pregnant outside of marriage, and that situation brought with it unimaginable scorn, embarrassment, and shame. And it may be that as you hear these words, whether in this room or on the Web or in some other way, you, too, are pregnant outside of marriage, and you don't know what to do about it. If that's your situation, please hear me carefully.

God has a purpose for that little person in your womb. It's not the same purpose as for Mary's child, but yet in a way, it is. God wants you and your baby, too, to participate in pushing back the Darkness in this world, and God will help you to do it.

The part of Mary's story that we call "The Christmas Story" involves a long journey on a donkey during the last two weeks of her pregnancy and giving birth in what was a sorry excuse for a cheap motel without her mama or any other women to help her—only her terrified husband. And it may be that you find yourself in a situation like that, too—not facing childbirth perhaps, but you're in a difficult spot today, facing tough decisions, and you're really, really afraid. I'm very glad to be able to tell you that as God was with Mary and Joseph, so God is with you right now. And God will help you.

After a year or two in Bethlehem, after Mary had established friendships with other young mothers and they had developed their own local support group, the familiar Voice spoke again, and told Joseph and Mary that they were in great danger. King Herod was about to try to kill Jesus, and they had to flee for their lives—that very night.

This meant that Mary's family became refugees, abandoning all their worldly goods except what little they could carry on their animals, leaving their friends without even saying good-bye;

and far worse, abandoning those friends to lose their little ones—children Mary knew and loved—to Herod’s swords.

Now “survivor guilt” was added to the many wounds gathering in Mary’s heart. Now she and Joseph and their two year-old son were on their way to another country, where they knew no one, where they didn’t know the language, and with death pursuing them in the darkness.

Once again, your situation this morning won’t be just like that, but it may be that you do find yourself a long way from home, knowing no one, unfamiliar with the local culture, and facing dangers known and unknown. And I’m glad to be able to tell you that, as God helped Mary and Joseph, so God will help you. And you are among friends.

Mary and her family did eventually return home to Nazareth, as you know. We know that Mary and Joseph had at least six other children—four sons and two daughters—a large family that must surely have been a challenge to feed and clothe on carpenter’s wages (Matthew 13:55).

And as their parents had taught them, so Mary and Joseph taught the things of God to their children, and they all worshiped together week by week in the synagogue (Deuteronomy 6:7). While Jesus was surely in the “advanced placement” class at the synagogue, the other children were there, too—and we know that at least two of Jesus’ brothers (James and Judas) eventually became leaders in the early church.

Like Mary and Joseph, some of us have or have had children who are smarter than we are; some of us have or have had children for whom classroom learning has not come easily; but most of us who have children have kids who are absolutely, decidedly, unequivocally . . . “normal.” Mary may or may not have had all three kinds of kids, but she focused on teaching her children the things that mattered—things that mattered both in time and in eternity.

Although most of my own clinical and pastoral work has been with adults, I’ve long agreed with those who emphasize the primacy of the first decade of our lives. Situations, events, decisions, and circumstances that barely register at all on the seismographs of adult life build or break life’s foundations for children in ways that last forever. With respect to painful experiences in our early years, God can and does forgive, and diligent soul work can bring healing, although the scars will likely remain.

When it comes to our own children’s spiritual training, Proverbs tells us to “*Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it*” (22:6). While our children may choose to make their homes in the far country of the spirit for a season, as many of us have done ourselves, if we’ve taught them to recognize the Voice while they were young, they will never be safe from God’s persistent beckoning to return home (Luke 15:11-32).

When we think about teaching our children, you and I frequently try to provide enrichment activities for them, and we encourage them toward excellence in those things . . . but what sort of champions do we really and truly want our children to become? The truth of the matter is that the purpose of human life is not to be found in certificates, trophies, scholarships or wealth, but in Christlike character that influences others.

Mary taught young Jesus and her other children the wisdom of God’s Word, where it is written, “*Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,*” declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

I like the story about a tour group visiting a picturesque Irish village. When one of the tourists rather patronizingly asked an old villager, “Were any great men born in this village?”

The old man answered, “Nope, only babies.”³ Young mother, listen not to the sirens of success that beckon you toward other goals. It is true for you today, as it was for Mary long ago, that **“the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.”**⁴

We don’t know just when it happened, but somewhere along the way Joseph died, leaving Mary as a grieving widow with seven children, a small carpentry shop, and no Social Security, AFDC, or SSI. We have single moms today, too, but in far larger numbers. Today, such singleness sometimes comes from death, but perhaps more often from divorce, which is in many ways more difficult, since the corpse that was your marriage continues to follow you around.

Mary and her children pulled together after Joseph’s death, and the children grew through their teen years and into adulthood. As the oldest son, Jesus surely carried much of the burden for their family with His mother. For much of Jesus’ life, Mary probably knew more about His true identity than He did Himself,⁵ but when Jesus finally began His public work, Mary was confused and deeply troubled by how He went about it. She may even have thought He’d lost His mind (Luke 8:19-21).

At the very least, Mary was greatly concerned by the course that she saw Jesus’ life taking. Our children’s lives obviously have different purposes than Jesus’ life had, but God does have a purpose for each of their lives. Our children, too, sometimes choose courses that bring concern and grief; but God is faithful, and, like Mary, we pray, and watch, and wait.

Two scenes remain. In the first, Mary sobs as her eldest son—the Child of Gabriel’s Promise—is tortured, executed, and buried. Some of us here today may know what it’s like to watch our children die, a grief like no other that visits human hearts. And finally, the last time we see Mary in Scripture, she’s with her other sons and Jesus’ disciples, having seen her little boy, now become the Risen Lord Christ, and waiting for the promised outpouring of His Spirit on them all (Acts 1:14).

So what’s the point? It seems to me that Mary’s example shows us at the end, as at the beginning, that parenthood is a profound statement of our faith in God. It takes a lot of faith to become a parent, but it is a faith anchored in eternal Hope, a faith guaranteed by an empty tomb and a living Savior.

There’s still no denying that we live in a crooked and perverse generation, but for those who are in Christ, the future of the world is not at all uncertain. The future lies in God’s hands, and moves toward God’s goals, as it always has, and always will, and those mothers and fathers who place their trust in God can raise their children in glad confidence about the future!

Remember this when you look into the eyes of your baby—any baby—or into the eyes of a child! Remember that this child brings from God the message that things may indeed be difficult, but the world still moves toward its appointed End.

As Gloria and Bill Gaither put it in their familiar hymn, “How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride, and joy he gives; but greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because He lives!”⁶

³ Leonard Ravenhill, *The Last Days Newsletter*.

⁴ William Ross Wallace, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle is the Hand that Rules the World*, 1865.

⁵ See Anne Rice, *Out of Egypt: Christ the Lord* (Knopf, 2005).

⁶ Bill and Gloria Gaither, *Because He Lives* (1971).