

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 1:26-33, 45-55
Sermon Title: "Mother Mary" (The Christmas Family Portrait)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA
December 18, 2011

Imagine a young girl cleaning her house with a broom in hand. Imagine that young girl without a halo over her head. Imagine her without a brilliant glow of light encircling her body. The girl looks just like any other young girl: cute, simple, slender, her entire world ahead of her. The girl in our imagination could be anybody, but for now let us call her Mother Mary.

However, at this moment Mary is not a mother. She is only a girl who will be married sometime soon to a young man named Joseph. Together Mary and Joseph will eventually build a family as husband and wife but, for now, Mary is just a girl. Mary's face does not shine porcelain white; her face is smudged with dirt possibly. Mary's hair is not covered with a white habit like nuns wear; her hair could be sticking out in places.

This girl goes about her duties around the household: cooking, cleaning, helping around the house. Yet one day, as she is doing her normal chores at home, a brilliant light envelopes the house. Every

corner and cranny is filled with a radiance like the sun. Mary shields her eyes for a moment, and as they adjust she witnesses what seems to be a human figure standing in the middle of the light. “Rejoice,” the figure says. “Hail to you. The Lord is with you, O favored one.” Mary has no idea what is going on. She is glad the figure is greeting her in the name of the Lord, but the light and splendor of the moment is overloading her senses. Usually she would welcome guests who approached her door, but for this visitor she has no idea why he is here or what he wants, and she may want him to leave.

The heavenly figure senses Mary’s trouble. “Mary, do not be gripped with fear, for you have found favor in the sight of the Lord.” Mary, a simple Jewish girl, the Lord is thinking of you. You are special enough to receive God’s grace and mercy. You haven’t done anything to earn this favor. You haven’t asked for favor to be given to you. The Lord of all creation has decided to come down from his glorious heaven to your level. Mary, God chooses you for a special purpose.

The heavenly figure in the brilliant light reports that the Lord of all creation has a gift for Mary, a gift she will carry deep within her body. Mary will carry God’s grace and mercy and kindness in the form of a baby, the Savior of the world.

For a newly-married couple, a baby is a welcomed gift. Young married people love to know that they will be parents soon. If Mary *and* Joseph (as newlyweds) were both standing with this heavenly figure wrapped in white light, they might hug each other and dance a jig at knowing they will have a young boy soon. But Joseph isn't present at this time. It is only Mary and the figure who stand in her home. Mary isn't married to Joseph yet, and she discovers that she is going to have a baby before she walks down the aisle. "Rejoice, O favored one," the figure said to her. Mary doesn't feel like rejoicing, nor does she feel very favored.

Eventually the heaven figure leaves, and so does the light that filled the entire house, and so do the plans that Mary had carefully created for herself. Mary is left alone, wondering what is going to happen next, now that she has become the mother of Christ Jesus.

At this point, we cannot help but think of that wonderful song we hear during Advent. Amy Grant has sung this song, along with Point of Grace and others. It is called *Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)*. I personally love the Amy Grant version, because I can hear the anguish in her voice. I can imagine the struggle that she is facing, as she tries to understand

how she could be the mother of God's only begotten Son.

The Mary in this song talks about how cold and weary she is, traveling through many moonless nights with a baby growing inside her. She wonders what she did to deserve to be the mother of Jesus. God the Father chose her for some reason, but in the song she doesn't sound too happy about the choice. She doesn't feel excited but scared, not hopeful but doubtful about the future. "I am waiting," this Mary sings, "in a silent prayer. I am frightened by the load I bear. In a world as cold as stone, must I walk this path alone?" Mary's family could be nearby in Nazareth. Joseph could be with her in Nazareth, or on the road to Bethlehem, or in Bethlehem. Mary could stand in a crowd of people similar to her. But this pregnancy is Mary's sole burden to bear. Nobody else can be pregnant with her, bear God's only son with her. This honored gift that God has given her has much responsibility attached to it, and Mary feels every heavy pound of it.

We have experienced unwanted situations before. An unexpected and unwelcome event occurs to us, and we really wished we didn't have to go through it. We wished we stayed in bed. Maybe it is an

unexpected pregnancy that adds stress to our lives. Maybe it is a change in our financial status. Maybe it is bad news about our health, or the health of a loved one. Maybe it is a breakdown with the car that is going to cost us money. Maybe it is the announcement of a boyfriend or girlfriend breaking up with us, or one of our friends says that he or she no longer wants to be friends. We have experience some sort of unpleasantness in our lives. Today we still wish that unwanted, unwelcome situation would just go away.

We may feel like Mother Mary once did. We are stuck in a situation that we cannot and will not escape easily. No matter how much wishing or complaining we do, we must go through the dark time. Huff and puff if we must, shed a tear, vent our frustrations with somebody, and believe the world is as cold as stone. The fact is: we are in the thick of something unbearable that we must bear. We must go through it, and pray that we reach more stable ground. Mary had nine months to carry her burden. We might understand how she felt, because our burdens might have been that long, or longer.

Mother Mary may never have planned to be the vessel, through which Christ would enter the world.

She could have been tired and frustrated and worried at times about the whole thing. And yet, what Mary does in response to the angel's visit is awe-inspiring. She gives all honor to God for his gift to her. Mary gives worship solely to the Giver of the gift.

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary says. “I am the instrument of God's love. I am the vessel God uses to bring about his will. I, Mary, a young Jewish girl, am totally humbled before my God to have him work in my life for the good of all creation.” Mary says the famous words that come from the last song The Beatles ever recorded, “Let it be.” The word is *amen*, which we say at the end of our prayers, and it means “Let it be.” Let God use me, Mary says without reservation. Let Mary to be the mother of the greatest child in the history of humanity. Let God make Mary into the first person to allow the Son of the Most High to dwell within her womb as well as within her heart. Let Mary bear Jesus, who will rule in a kingdom that will never end. Amen. Let it be.

Mary doesn't stop worshipping God, even after the angel Gabriel leaves her. She runs to her relative Elizabeth, whose baby within her own womb leaps for joy at the coming of the Christ. Elizabeth tries to worship Mary for being special, yet Mother Mary will not take the worship. She turns it around toward

God.

Mary then prays a famous prayer that every choral group loves to sing. We know it as The Magnificat, a Latin word meaning magnify, amplify, raise up. Who is raised up? Not Mary. God is. God is magnified for letting Mary's life be the starting point for Jesus' life on earth. God is amplified as the One who scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who brings down the mighty from their thrones. God lifts up the poor. God remembers the least people and the last people and the lowly people.

It is remarkable that, amid the stress and strain of receiving a new child without having planned for it yet, Mother Mary is able to lift her head up and witness God at work. She has the vision to see God at work in her, and also in the world. All those who are not proud, who are not arrogant and cocky – who try to live the kinds of lives God wants them to live but they keep getting knocked down by the evil in this world that wants to steal their joy – all those who are not proud will see that evil eliminated. They will see cocky people knocked down from their arrogant thrones, and given a big helping of humble pie, so they too might become more humble and more faithful to God's call in their lives. Those who are poor – poor in finances, poor in possessions, poor in spirit, poor in optimism,

poor in hope – those who are poor will be filled to capacity with the things of God. Those who are poor are taken care of; they will not be the last but the first in the kingdom of heaven. They will see those who rely solely on money and possessions and good looks lose their prize treasures, so that they can refocus their attention on God, and thank him for all that they have.

Mother Mary is able to lift her head above the burden of experiencing unwanted and unwelcome situations. During such a dark time, she sees the God who loves her.

Back in 1864, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was walking the streets of the town on Christmas Day. We know Longfellow as one of the greatest poets and educators in American history. He was known for writing the story called Paul Revere's Ride, in which Revere rides through the streets shouting, "The British are coming! The British are coming!" However, on Christmas Day 1864, Longfellow was not feeling so great. As we know from the history books, the War Between the States would soon end in 1865, but Longfellow did not know that in 1864. He was deeply depressed about the United States being at war against itself. What was more, Longfellow's son had joined the Union army despite his father's objections,

and he was wounded badly during a fight in Virginia. If that wasn't enough, Longfellow was still mourning the death of his beloved wife, who had died when their house caught on fire and burned to the ground. On Christmas Day 1864, Longfellow was experiencing unwanted, unwelcome events that were making him dejected, sad, hopeless.

That Christmas Day, as Longfellow walked the streets, he heard the bells from the churches ringing. They were announcing the birth of Jesus Christ. Longfellow was not moved, at first. The hate that was ruining the country was too strong, and it was mocking the song that the bells tolled. "In despair [Longfellow] bowed his head. 'There is no peace on earth,' [he] said." The country at war, his son's wounding, his lost house, his wife's death: all too much for him to bear.

But the bells kept ringing. They were still announcing the birth of Jesus Christ. They were telling Longfellow and others in the town that the "wrong shall fail and the right prevail" in Christ. Jesus is born to us. Even though loved ones die, even though property is lost, even though fire may destroy, even though it feels as though the world might be going to heck in a hand basket, Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel, forever. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was

inspired that Christmas Day to write a poem: a poem that God would use to heal him. That poem was put to words, and we know the hymn as *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*.

For Longfellow it was the bells. For Mother Mary it was the Baby within her. For us, it is the Holy Spirit moving with strength through us and around us. No matter what we struggle with, we can lift our heads above it. We can still witness God moving. We see the God who loves us. Take a deep breath, and allow joy to fill our hearts, and say simply as Mother Mary did, "Amen. Let it be."