

December 20, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Advent—Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Canticle 15
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Like last Sunday, the Gospel reading this Sunday diverges from the Lectionary. For today, the Lectionary gives us the story of the Annunciation, the heavenly messenger Gabriel's visit to Mary. It also assigns the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, in place of the psalm. But the lectionary leaves out the bridge between those two pieces: the Visitation, the story of Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. So we added in that part. To be clear, in order the story goes like this: Annunciation, Visitation, Magnificat.

There are many reasons why it's good to hear the full arc of this narrative. A big one is this: if we want to learn from women in the New Testament, this is an important place to look. In all four gospels, it's the only section with a sustained focus on women, and these women act and speak.

Admittedly, remembering the paucity of women in the New Testament always makes me a little sad. I try not to linger on the sadness, and instead to make the most of what we get when we get it. This is a good time to admit that Jakki and I collect images of Mary that we display in our home. We don't collect images of Jesus. For me, this practice reflects a yearning for representation and inclusion of the divine feminine, something that is sorely lacking in the Cristian tradition. Some might say that focusing on Mary to do this is heretical, and, to some degree, it just might be.

The Christian tradition itself has complicated relationship with Mary. My own relationship with Mary mirrors that. I realized recently that one of the few things I remember from my childhood Roman Catholic Catechism classes was being required to memorize not *one* but *two* essential prayers: the Our Father—that's what Roman Catholics call the Lord's Prayer—and the Hail Mary. Back then, I would have learned the traditional language version of the Hail Mary, which goes like this:

Hail, Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst 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.

Back on All Saints' Sunday, I discussed briefly the Protestant problematic of praying to saints. But that's not the topic for today. Instead, I want to observe that, while those words are comforting to me now, that became true only after I found the Episcopal tradition, ironically. My memory of memorizing those words is a little painful and, like Mary herself, wrapped up with a lot of talk about sin.

I have never been a good memorizer, but memorizing those two prayers was a reasonable request, and something that even a poor memorizer might accomplish. But the scene in my mind is not one of encouragement, but is instead one of being told over and over again how important it was to get it *exactly* right, and of feeling so afraid that I wouldn't.

I told someone this story recently, and said that I remember it happening in second grade. But I also wondered why I could nail it down to *that* year, when my childhood memories are generally so very fuzzy. But as I prepared for this sermon, I remembered why it was almost certainly in second grade that I learned the Our Father and the Hail Mary: that was the year of my first communion. A big part of preparation for *first communion* is actually preparation for *first confession*, and that means preparation for *first penance*. Penance generally goes something like the priest saying, "Say two Our Fathers and three Hail Marys," which you would leave the confessional and immediately do, kneeling right there in the church.

Preparing for confession also meant learning about mortal and venial sins and what happens if you die with an un-absolved sin on your soul. That's among the other few things I remember learning in Catechism class. Top all that off with knowing that you were going into the confessional to tell your darkest secrets to the scary priest you'd never even spoken to you before. I was just a second-grader whose darkest secret wasn't very dark at all, but it felt loaded.

Maybe it was just me. But even today and even for us Mary remains all mixed up in sin and redemption. If you were here two Sundays ago, you know that our Service of Lessons & Carols for Advent began with the story of "the Fall"—the one in Genesis 3 about Adam and Eve and that "crafty serpent" in the Garden of Eden. After the service someone wondered about the inclusion of that reading. As I mentioned then, *The Book of Occasional Services* is the supplement to *The Book of Common Prayer* that gives us the liturgy for Advent Lessons & Carols. It includes this instruction: "The Lesson from the third chapter of Genesis is never omitted." Christian tradition says that sin came into the world through Adam's disobedience, which is what necessitates the redemptive coming Christ, which is what we're looking toward in Advent, which is why our first lesson was the Fall.

The thing is, it may be *said* that sin came into the world through *Adam's* disobedience, but usually it's *Eve* who gets the *blame*. Women take the fall for the Fall. Also in the Christian tradition, Eve-the-temptress is superseded by Mary-the-virgin. That's an improvement, I guess, but the binary remains problematic. As Eve would be eternal temptress, Mary would be eternal virgin. It's hard for regular women to find a place for themselves between those two extremes.

As we search for that place, we might start by observing that, if Jesus redeems us from Adam's sin, maybe Mary redeems us from Eve's sin. Actually, the real theologians among us would argue that Mary can't do that. But maybe it has a ring of truth, if not in fact, but in application. As Mary "redeems" us from Eve's sin, perhaps she sets us from the binary itself, and that allows us to inhabit our full humanity, for what it can accomplish in the world—and that is what sets us free. Maybe that's at least part of what Mary has to tell us about the place of the feminine in the divine. We are all made in God's image. Understanding what God looks like requires looking at all of us.

I know that barely touches on some big topics. But I want to pause here and share some images of Mary that might be helpful in helping us think more about all this. First, here's an 18th-century painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo.¹



You can see some typical Marian imagery here. If you look closely, you can see that Mary is standing on a snake who is holding an apple in its mouth. This represents her victory over the devil. We might not believe that that sin came into the world through Adam's disobedience, and that Eve is to blame. But we should believe that sin exists in the world. It does. And maybe Mary can help us overcome it.

As to what that might look like, here's a twenty-first-century image of Mary, a linocut print by Benjamin Wildflower. It incorporates not only a snake but also the words of the Magnificat. This Mary looks pretty powerful, as does the other one, actually. I first saw this on a t-shirt worn by a seminarian at the Black Lives Matter March in New Haven back in June.²



Here's another print by the same artist.³



I think we can all read some suppositions as to what he might be getting to in this one.

Most Episcopalians might not pray to Mary, but we are encouraged to say her words, using the Magnificat as the canticle for Morning and Evening Prayer. This week I saw an article by a Mennonite pastor supposing that “Jesus learned his prophetic ministry from his mother.”⁴ That would make sense. Luke summarizes his entire Gospel in Mary’s words in the Magnificat. Maybe that is at the root of where Jesus “got it.”

I want to show one more image. This is a depiction of the Visitation by Vermont artist Janet McKenzie.⁵



As I said when I started, the lectionary doesn't include the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. But our collect today does say this: “Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself ...” If we're looking to be biblical, maybe that daily visitation to our conscience ought to be conducted by Mary, using the words attributed to her.

Let's hear part of that Visitation story again: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ..." Maybe, when Mary visits us, whatever God is nurturing within us leaps, and we are filled with the Holy Spirit. To that, we might assent as Mary did: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Notes

¹ Giovanni Battista Tiepolo *The Immaculate Conception*.

² Benjamin Wildflower, *Magnificat*. This print is available for purchase online at <https://benwildflower.com/collections/prints-1/products/magnificat-print> (accessed December 20, 2020).

³ Benjamin Wildflower, *Mary 2010*. This print is available for purchase online at <https://benwildflower.com/collections/prints-1/products/mary-2018-print> (accessed December 20, 2020).

⁴ Isaac S. Villegas, "Mary's Song Reveals Her Politics of Mercy," *The Christian Century*, December 2, 2020, available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/mary-s-song-reveals-her-politics-mercy> (accessed December 20, 2020).

⁵ Janet MacKenzie, *The Visitation*. This print is available for purchase online at <https://www.janetmckenzie.com/prints.html> (accessed December 20, 2020).