

Overshadowed

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 17, 2017 ~~ Third Sunday of Advent
Text: Luke 1:26-38

Mary is, beyond doubt, the central figure of the story of the birth of Christ. Without Mary, there is no birth, simple as that. Even God acknowledges the centrality, the necessity of Mary in the story of the birth of Emmanuel, “God With Us,” in the text we read just a few moments ago. The angel Gabriel came to her and said, “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus.” No Mary, no Jesus. It’s that simple. We usually just gloss right over this basic element of the story of the birth of Christ. Of course, the angel came to her to tell her what would happen. Of course, the angel told her not to be afraid, before he told her about the baby. Of course, the angel went on to tell her all about this child she would bear, could bear, if she agreed. The whole agreeing part is what we are the quickest to gloss over. But it’s there. It’s clear Mary had to consent to all this, but we rarely pause in our rush through the story to take note of this because, after all, the story is really about Jesus, isn’t it?

Is it? It’s easy to assume it is when we read through this part of the story quickly, and we always read through it quickly, that Mary’s consent was a forgone conclusion to all parties in the story. Except it wasn’t. Not really. How do we know this? Because of

Mary's question to the angel. When the angel was finished with his rather lengthy spiel about how important this baby to be born would be to the future of the world, Mary isn't silent. She asks a question. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" So, angel, she says, what exactly are you proposing here? I am virgin and I don't see that changing just so this crazy situation you are describing can take place. That tells us Mary was smart. Mary was savvy. Mary wasn't falling for some crazy story so that some guy could take advantage of her. She knew she was pretty. She knew she didn't like the way some of the men in the village leered at her when she walked to the well for water. No one was taking advantage of her! Not now. Not ever.

So, the angel gives her an even more fantastic answer. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," the angel explains. This has nothing to do with men or one man, the angel explains. This has to do with God and only with God. It doesn't make sense by human standards so don't even try to explain it that way, the angel tells her. "For nothing will be impossible with God," is how the angel concludes his explanation. And that's when Mary gave her answer: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Okay, I believe you, Mary says. This is from God, not men. I believe you. I trust God. I'll do it, she says. And in that

moment, everything changed for her, and everyone else, then and now.

Really? Are we really supposed to believe that this incredible, unbelievable exchange between an angel and a young girl happened? Are we really supposed to believe that Jesus was born of this young virgin girl, through some dramatic and fantastical action of the Holy Spirit? Really? Well, I suppose the answer to that comes down to how you choose to see this story. Is it a recorded historical fact, undisputable just because the Bible says it's so? Or, is it something much more, much bigger than merely words on a page claiming to be fact rather than fiction? Is the question of fact or fiction even in play here? I would argue that it isn't. This is not, nor was it ever intended to be a historical account of a miraculous event. It was, and still remains, an incredibly beautiful and essential origin story of the Christian faith whose presence in the gospel of Luke is vitally important to how we understand ourselves to be followers of the living Christ.

The whole point of this story in the Gospel of Luke, as well as in the Gospel of Matthew, which has a much shorter version of the nativity story, is to assure the people of Jesus' time that he was the real deal. They wanted people to see, to understand, to believe that Jesus was not just another crazy prophet running around ancient Palestine claiming to speak for God, of which there were many at this moment in history. The Gospels of Luke and

Matthew with their stories of Jesus' birth with its miraculous overtones and its roots in the ancient lineage of the royal house of Israel were providing a foundation for all the ministry of Jesus which had already taken place by the time these stories of his birth were recorded. The gospel writers wanted to show that Jesus was someone unique, someone clearly born here on earth to do something extraordinary that no one had come close to doing before. Jesus was one of a kind, and a one of a kind person had to have had a one of a kind way of coming into this world and so the stories we know now as the nativity stories came to be in two of the four Gospels. And with these stories, Mary came into our line of sight for the first time, which is quite something since the writers of these two texts probably knew her best as the mother of Jesus who wept at the foot of his cross as he was dying.

Remember, Matthew and Luke didn't visit the manger to see the infant Jesus lying on the straw. None of the disciples were there in this magical moment that started it all. But they knew Mary. They knew her as the mother who loved her son beyond all reason, following him to Golgotha risking the wrath of the Romans as she did. They knew Mary as the mother who was always there, in the background, with all the other women who made up the entourage of followers who had formed around Jesus. They knew she worried about him and they knew she would never come between him and this obvious call from God

which he pursued with every fiber of his being. They knew Mary alright, but as the aging mother of their incredible, miraculous, divine friend. They never knew her as a young girl, frightened to give birth to her first child. To them, Mary had always been overshadowed by her son, and all that he was doing, all the ways he was changing their lives and the lives of all who encountered him. It would seem, then, that Mary's destiny was always to be overshadowed in the unfolding story of Jesus.

Except, Mary only stays in the shadows and on the fringes of the stories of Jesus if we put her there. Mary only stays on the sidelines if we refuse to see her for who she really was and who the Bible portrays her to be. It is important to remember that this portrayal of her is extraordinary in its own right, regardless of whether we consider it fact or myth. This story describes Mary as a woman of incredible courage and strength, someone who had found favor with God even at a young age. To agree to bear a child out of wedlock – remember, she and Joseph were engaged but not married at this point – was unbelievably dangerous. An unmarried pregnant woman could be stoned to death at any moment, if a man, any man, so chose. Mary knew this, yet she said yes. Mary dared to trust God with her entire being and that is what made the birth of the Baby Jesus possible. Without Mary's courage, strength, determination and faith, Jesus might have been himself overshadowed in the swirling mists of history. Just

another crackpot prophet who died an ignominious death. But this mother weeping at the foot of the cross, this mother about whom those rumors of a birth in a stable so long ago kept coming back to them, this incredible woman and her unwavering confidence and belief in her son as uniquely blessed by God, she and all the other women like her are what made the difference as this new faith began to take hold.

The truth is Mary was the first of a long line of women whose support of Jesus and the disciples formed the foundation on which the church was built. The gospels are full stories about them – Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, Peter’s mother (we don’t even know her name), another Mary and her sister Martha and still another Mary known as the Magdalene. The gospels are filled with the stories of these incredible women whose strength, courage, bravery and above all their deep and unwavering faith gave birth not only to children but to the way of life which became the Christian faith. But, somewhere along the way, a funny thing happened. Men became threatened by them. Men downplayed the roles they played in the movement, eventually succeeding in writing them out of the history of the Christian faith as much as they could get away with. Even Mary herself was disrespected by them as they chose to elevate her to a semi-divine status as “Theotokos” or “mother of God” as a counter-balance to the great

love for the mother goddess Artemis whom they had to supplant as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire.

This was when the image of Mary changed from a strong, faithful and important leader of the early church to a meek, cowering girl shivering in fear as the angel towered over her in the Anunciation, that moment when the impending birth of the Christ was announced to her as a done deal rather than as an invitation extended to a faithful woman being asked to partner with God to save the world. Mary herself was overshadowed by the image of who the church needed her to be in order to keep all women happy with their subjugated roles in the early church, and indeed in every aspect of their lives. Meekness, submissiveness, virginal beauty and a willingness to surrender her very body if that's what was asked were the virtues Mary was forced to embody as the centuries passed, a grave injustice to her and to all women who have been measured against this impossible standard of womanhood since.

That's why, as I hear the news stories of women whose tales of harassment and mistreatment finally escape the bounds of being overshadowed by lies and innuendo, I think Mary is smiling. Every time a young girl stands up for herself to claim the future she believes God has placed before her, Mary is cheering. Every time a young mother labors hard in delivering her first child, Mary aches with her. Every time a mother weeps at the

grave of a dead child, Mary weeps too, knowing all too well what it's like to have your heart ripped to pieces. Every time a woman is bypassed for promotion, ignored for doing a good job, harassed for being too pretty or not pretty enough, Mary is steaming mad too. And every time a woman confronts an impossible situation and decides to forge ahead anyway, Mary is there reminding her of that long ago message from an angel, "for nothing will be impossible with God."

Dear friends, this Christmas season I hope you will make the effort to pull Mary out from the shadows where history has tried to place her. Let her courage and faith as a young woman inspire you to do amazing things you never thought you could. Let her deep commitment and trust in God's wisdom as a mature woman inspire you to do the same. This Christmas see Mary as more than the adoring mother of a beautiful baby because truly she is so very much more than that. See her as the inspiration for every powerful, loving and amazing woman you've ever known, because that's exactly who she is and has always been. Amen.