

## THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

One of the most famous works of art in the world is Michelangelo's sculpture in Rome called "The Pieta." In stunning white marble Mary holds her dead son in her arms after Christ's body was taken down from the cross. The depth of feeling and the power that comes from that cold hard stone has captured the hearts of millions. In 1964 the Pieta came to this country for the New York World's Fair, and people stood in line for hours to catch a glimpse from a conveyor belt moving past the sculpture.

Today "The Pieta" in Rome is under heavy guard, because a few years ago in 1972 a man attacked her with a hammer, and before he could be stopped, Mary's face and one of her arms were badly damaged.

Attacking Mary is nothing new. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants have done so for centuries, in different ways. Roman Catholics have tended to attack Mary by "superhumanizing" her, putting her on such a pedestal that she becomes a godlike figure, the fourth person of the Trinity. They say that in Latin America, where Mary worship is especially strong, the cry of the atheist is – "there is no God, and Mary is his mother."

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which refers not to Jesus' conception but to Mary's; and the doctrine of the Assumption, which proclaims that Mary was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory – both of these are relatively recent doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

If Roman Catholics have tended to superhumanize and worship Mary, Protestants have tended to ignore her. "Mary who?" a Protestant might ask, sniffing at Roman Catholic Mary-olotry. As Anglicans we, the *Via Media*, honor Mary as the mother of Christ without venerating her as a god.

Here, at the Church that bears Mary's name, we have that wonderfully moving statue out there in the Mary garden and columbarium, created by Margaret Adams Parker, the mother of our parishioner Margaret Stafford. I encourage you to visit that statue of Mary after the service this morning. Or any time.

So what then can we say about Mary?

First of all, Mary was the first doubter, the first person to doubt the claim of Christians that God was born among us. You remember the story in St. Luke's Gospel when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" What was Mary's reaction? Certainly it wasn't unmitigated joy. Mary could well have become the original Grinch that stole Christmas, if she had said No. Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled by the angel's words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be, implying that she didn't at all like this kind of greeting from the angel. It annoyed her. She was a simple teenage girl with a humble background, and she probably didn't want all this attention, to be singled out by God.

To reassure her, the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." And then the angel continues, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

Once more Mary's reaction was disbelief. "How can this be, since I have no husband?" Even angels should know the facts of life! For her to get pregnant during her yearlong engagement period to Joseph would bring her shame and dishonor, or even stoning to death. No wonder Mary said, "I don't believe it." She didn't want to believe it. How could she explain it to Joseph, to her family, her friends? No one would believe this angel story. "Look, angel, with all due respect, if this is a blessing, please give it to someone else."

Isn't that so often our initial reaction to something new? "You're kidding!" "I don't believe it!" and then "How will this affect me?" The call may be from God, in whatever mysterious way that call comes, but our first reaction is usually not "thy will be done" but "my will be done. What about me?" The hardest prayer of all, especially when things aren't going our way, is "thy will be done."

It's no wonder that Mary's first reaction to the angel's news was out of her self-will. I think most of us can relate to her in that regard. She was after all only human. The wonder is how readily she turned self-will into God's will.

But secondly, notice how quickly the first doubter became the first believer. After Mary had pondered what the angel had to say, and overcome her initial self-centered

negative reaction, she responded, “Here am I, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me as you have said.” Or as a modern translation puts it, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to do whatever God wants. May everything you said come true.” How quickly Mary went from unbelief to belief, from doubt to faith, from self-will to God’s will. And Luke’s Gospel tells us she sang that famous hymn “The Magnificat”, based on the Song of Hannah hundreds of years earlier, at the birth of her son Samuel.

What do you suppose would have happened if Mary had said “No” to God? Would God have gone looking for someone else? Did God have a Plan B? It’s amazing, isn’t it, that in spite of her doubt and her self-will, Mary said “Yes” to God’s invitation to bear the Savior of us all, and she was favored by God. And that’s the third thing we can say about Mary – she was favored by God. She was the first doubter, she was the first believer, and she was favored by God.

Being favored by God, as Mary was, is not exactly like winning the Nobel Prize. It isn’t all glory and honor to be favored by God, as Mary would find out, as would Jesus, as did the prophets before them, and the saints who came after, and all down through the centuries who try seriously to follow God’s invitation. Being favored by God and doing God’s will mean difficult times for Mary. Questions and gossip about her pregnancy, a long and arduous journey in the later stages of pregnancy, birth in a barn, fleeing to Egypt before she could return home, dealing with a son who seemed at times to rebuff her. And then the greatest agony any parent can experience, the death of her own child, the pain of which is carved so eloquently in the stone of Michelangelo’s “Pieta.”

The world doesn’t like to hear, in the words of Mary’s song “The Magnificat,” that God “has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, ...brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ...filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Those words should be carved above the seat of every ruler and politician. It’s not how things are, and the world doesn’t like to be turned upside down by a handmaiden of low estate and her son – or by anyone else.

I’m feeling that as your preacher this morning I would be remiss if I didn’t include in this sermon some thoughts about all the events of this past week—the threats of nuclear

attack on our country, the terror attacks by white supremacists in Charlottesville, the mosque explosion in Minnesota, and more. We ask “Where is God? Where is sanity? What can we do?” The doubts fester and our faith falters. Is God still in charge?

How do we get to hope in these dark ratty days? Our daughter sent me a Facebook quote from Anne Lamott, in which she says, “We don't think our way to hope. We take the actions, and then the insight follows. The insight is that hope springs from awareness of love, immersion in love, commitment to love.” One of our president’s latest tweets even says we all need to come together in love.

“Get outside,” says Lamott, “even just to the front porch, and look up into the sky and into the tree tops, and say the great praise- prayer: WOW. Listen for the sound of birds. Close your eyes and really listen. If birdsong was the only proof we have that there is a bigger deeper reality than what transcends what we are seeing on the news, it would be enough for me. Eyes closed, breathe, listen: secret of life.”

“And lastly,” Lamott says, “take care of the poor – right now. ...If you want to feel loving feelings, which is hope, do loving things. Send a donation to a group that feeds and shelters and clothes people, in your neighborhood, or Syria. “

So what we learn from Mary, if we allow ourselves to ponder on her in troubled times, is that it’s OK to doubt, but that we mustn’t stop there. We must then doubt our doubts, allow God to turn our self-will into God’s will, and go forward in faith. Faith and hope. When God favors us with God’s Holy Spirit, we must be prepared to be used by God in whatever way God chooses.

Then we’ll be able to proclaim with Mary those beautiful words of the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”