

THE CARPENTER'S MOTHER
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke: 1: 26 -35 (NIV)

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledge to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings to you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

Reading: "The Unborn Daughter" by R.S. Thomas

**On her unborn in the vast circle
Concentric with our finite lives,
On her unborn, her name uncurling
Like a young fern within the mind;
On her unclothed with flesh or beauty
In the womb's darkness, I bestow
The formal influence of the will,
The wayward influence of the heart,
Weaving upon her fluid bones
The subtle fabric of her being.
Hair, hands and eyes, the body's texture,
Shot with the glory of the soul.¹**

¹ R. S. Thomas, "The Unborn Daughter," *R.S. Thomas: Poems* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 26.

The question of the identity of Jesus and his relationship with his mother has never been answered to anyone's satisfaction. Every perspective on Jesus or Mary is shaped by our own identity. For example, a Cajun friend of mine is certain that Jesus was Cajun for three reasons: He liked to serve fish to his friends; he could make his own wine; and he was not afraid of water. A black friend believes that Jesus was African American because he called everyone "brother;" he liked gospel; and he could not get a fair trial. An Italian friend is certain that Jesus was Italian because he talked with his hands; he had wine with every meal; and he used olive oil for everything. A California acquaintance thinks Jesus was Californian because he never cut his hair; he walked around barefoot all the time; and he started a new religion. My Irish cousin thinks that Jesus was Irish because he never got married; he was always telling stories; and he loved green pastures. My rabbinic colleague says that Jesus was Jewish because he went into his father's business; he lived at home until he was 33; and he was sure that his Mother was a virgin and his mother was sure he was God. My wife thinks that Jesus was actually a woman because he could feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food in the house; he kept trying to get his message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it; and even when he was dead, he had to get up because there was more work to do.

The name of the carpenter's mother in Hebrew is Miriam. In Aramaic, the language she spoke, her name would be Maryam. Her son's name would be Yeshua. Yeshua is what Maryam would have called her son. I think Yeshua would have called Maryam "mom." Within a century she would be called the Virgin Mary, and in short order the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

The veneration of Mary is found not only in the Christian world. Deep respect is given to her in Qur'an. Though the New Testament mentions that Jesus had brothers, the Christian tradition has glossed over that possibility to suggest that these were step children by Joseph's previous marriage. The idea of perpetual virginity grew with the adulation of the carpenter's mother. Eventually the Christian faith declared that Mary was also conceived immaculately. That is to say, Mary was born without original sin.

As the Christian church argued about the divinity and humanity of Jesus the doctrine of the Holy Trinity emerged. It increasingly became an abstract theological doctrine that removed the shepherd from his flock. Lay men and women found the godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, remote and inaccessible. Mary, however, remained a mother – approachable and always accessible. Anyone who had seen Michelangelo's *Pieta* or heard the

story of the manger would have been touched by the profound agony and simple faith of this mother. The Catholic tradition would declare that “Mary is the cause of our salvation.” And when your life is in shambles, when you are bowed down with guilt, when there is no one else who will take you in where do you turn to? You turn to your mother. And thus it was that the cult of Mary rose up in the hearts of peasants around the world. She remains in the hearts of millions today, ever the image of grace and affection.

Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century of the Common Era, declared that Mary was the antidote to Eve and the fall of mankind. He saw Eve as a virgin, spouse of Adam, who was disobedient and became for herself and the entire human race the cause of death, bound as she was to her unbelief and disobedience. Mary was also a Virgin, betrothed, and who through her obedience and faith became both for herself and the entire human race the cause of salvation.² Mary thus became not only the cause of salvation but specifically the redemption of women who had been so maligned by the myth of Eve. Why this transformation of woman through the Blessed Virgin Mary did not also transform the patriarchy of the church and the role of women in the church is the subject of another conversation.

² Jeffrey Keyes, CPPS, “Mariology in the Fathers of the Second Century,” www.rc.net/oakland/cpps/mariology.pdf. Downloaded 4/8/2006.

The heretic in me thinks that the more a human being is revered, the greater the veneration, and the thicker the idealization the more impotent the person's life and message becomes. When you take Mary out of the kitchen or garden and enshrine her as the Queen of Heaven she becomes a porcelain figure that is easily chipped and trivialized. Do you remember George Cromarty and Ed Rush's song, "Plastic Jesus?" The closing refrain is:

"I don't care if it rains or freezes
 Long as I got my plastic Jesus
 Riding on the dashboard of my car
 He's the dude with the rusty nails
 Walks on water, don't need sails
 Riding on the dashboard of my car.

I don't care if the night is scary
 As long as I got the Virgin Mary
 Sittin' on the dashboard of my car
 She don't slip and she don't slide
 'Cause her ass is magnetized
 Sittin' on the dashboard of my car."³

I do not mean to be disrespectful, but the song demonstrates that the real power of the Carpenter's mother is lost in iconography. As sparse as it is, her story – on very human terms – is one of commanding love and unflinching presence.

We are told that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. In first century Palestine that probably meant that she was somewhere between the ages of

³ George Cromarty and Ed Rush (lyrics and chords), "Plastic Jesus;" <http://www.guntheranderson.com/v/data/plastic9.htm>.

13 to 15. Since she was a child she was given work to do in her house or family garden. She would know dish washing, sweeping, weeding, kneading, cooking, laundry, and mending. Mary may have tended flocks of sheep, or goats, or chickens. Having grown up in the province of Galilee Mary would have seen the ruin of her country by foreign invaders. For over a thousand years Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, Parthians, and Romans had ruled Galilee. Herod the Great had nearly broken the backs of the people with oppressive taxes that paid for his opulent palaces. Galileans were often forced to porter supplies for passing Roman legions, and were subjected to beatings and insults. Outraged by the constant injustice, Galilean rebels overran the Roman garrison at Sepphoris in 4 B.C.E. They were savagely put down by reinforcements. Galilean leaders were crucified. Mary would have been old enough to tend to the wounded who managed to escape into the hills.⁴

Mary grew up in a very rough and violent world. Her status as a woman only made life more painful for her. All women were considered unclean. The association of women with Eve and the so-called “fall” of mankind perpetrated a stigma of personal and moral weakness that ostensibly made men superior.

⁴ Richard Covington, “In Search of the Real Virgin Mary,” *U.S. New and World Report: Women of the Bible*; 2005, pp. 56-57

The birth of a female child was often met with mourning. Girls were not thought to be strong enough to do the hard work of farming and were often considered as only another mouth to feed. They were expensive. When they were married a dowry had to be provided on their behalf. You must understand that the dowry was not money that she took with her into the marriage. The dowry became the property of her husband. In fact women did not hold property. They were property. Women could not divorce their husbands though their husbands could divorce their wives. And when she was divorced the husband retained all property rights and rights over the children. This often left the women in dire poverty. Survival could mean slavery, prostitution, and begging.

Betrothal to Joseph meant something different from a modern day engagement. Today a couple becomes engaged when the two of them agree together to get married. In ancient times betrothal was a contractual arrangement made between two families on behalf of their children. The agreement was a binding one and the man and woman were considered husband and wife both legally and religiously. What they were not allowed to do was cohabit. The betrothal was performed in a very simple manner. After the blessing of the wine the following prayer was offered: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who hast sanctified us with

Thy commandments and given us commandments concerning connections, (that is to say, sexual intercourse) and hast forbidden unto us those who are merely betrothed, and permitted unto us those lawfully married...⁵ After a waiting period, which could be as long as a year, rings might be exchanged; the full marriage contract, called the Ketubah, would be signed; and the “home taking” would be permitted. Only then could full sexual relations be sanctioned.

Thus, when Mary was found to be pregnant there were several possibilities: Joseph and Mary had sexual intercourse, which Joseph denied; Mary had sexual intercourse with another man, an act of adultery that was punishable by stoning unto death; or Mary was raped. The Biblical tradition states that none of these possibilities account for Mary’s pregnancy. According to Luke’s gospel, the angel Gabriel appeared unto Mary and announced that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit.

With that announcement the glorification of Mary rises as the credibility of the authentic faith wanes. I propose to you that the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the Virgin birth of Jesus distort the most radical claims of the Christian gospel. Furthermore, Gabriel’s

⁵ Marcus Jastrow and Bernard Brachman, “Betrothal,” *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*, 2002 at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=995&letter=B>, downloaded 4/08/2006.

announcement is inconsistent with most of what Jesus would teach about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus would teach us that the kingdom of God is found in the most common circumstances; as common as home baked bread, a gentle meal with anyone who is hungry, the weeds in the garden, and the desperate search for a lost lamb or child. Jesus warned us not to presume too much who are the agents of God's grace. They are often angels unaware and may be women or children, tax collectors or harlots, single moms or drag queens. God's grace appears in many guises, dialects, and skin tones. God's grace is meant to be a gift to every human being and there is no place in the kingdom of God for judgmental hypocrisy. There is only time for compassion and mercy.

Given these themes of Jesus' teaching, dare we consider the possibility that this unwed teenager, I'm sorry, adolescent single female head of household, could give birth to one of the greatest teachers of humankind? Could it be that out of this promiscuous teenaged girl the Messiah was born? He would not be the first or last illegitimate child who brought to the world a noble voice. Consider Erasmus, Leonardo de Vinci, Frederick Douglas, and William the Conqueror. This possibility in my mind

speaks more to the power of God than an incredible conception by the Holy Spirit or a “Virgin Birth.”

Beyond the issue of legitimacy Mary seemed to be consistently present to her son. Like any mother she tried to provide him with a loving home, filled with stories of faith and responsibilities to one another. I have no doubt that she wrangled through adolescence like the rest of us. We have glimpses of her on the margins of Jesus’ ministry. Ultimately we find her at Golgotha where Jesus was crucified. I sometimes wonder if it is not easier for one to die for a cause than it is to watch a child die for his or her cause.

From beginning to end Mary was present to her child. She never abandoned him though she might not have fully understood him. She was faithful with all the love that a mother can give to her child. I have no doubt that she worried, lost sleep, couldn’t eat, and shed many tears throughout his short life. I also have no doubt that she held him close to her and breathed deeply the smell of a clean baby, laughed often, and wondered at the joy and mystery that every child brings to a parent.

In the midst of this Advent season, I invite you to consider Mary and all the other common women we call mother. Regardless of their marital status, sexual orientation, color, religious affiliation, ability, and age, I invite you to wonder what gravity and grace they might introduce to the world. Sit

back and watch the rising. Do not concern yourself with the means of insemination, method of delivery, or possible adoption. Consider the possibility that in light of the Carpenter's Mother there is no such thing as an illegitimate child. Maybe the real message is that we are all children of God.

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