

Holy One – may we hear your words hidden in human speech this day and have the courage to follow in Mary’s footsteps every day. Amen.

This day’s sermon starts with a confession. I have with lip service celebrated Mary, the mother of God. I have spoken well of her in papers, sermons and stories. I have said any number of the right things when it comes to Mary, and her role within the wider Christian body. I have done all these things, and yet I’ve never really taken Mary seriously.

You ever have a moment in life where a light bulb goes off and you realize you’re not as evolved or “woke” as you thought you were about a particular issue? No? Just me? That’s fine... I’ll admit I just realized this week that when it comes to Mary, the mother of the Son of God I have been woefully, embarrassingly asleep.

There are legitimate reasons for this lapse. The past two thousand years of deeply patriarchal theology have forced Mary into a box where she is this archetype of a nurturing, gracefully poised, almost wet noodle of a woman. Even when we know consciously that nothing could be further from the truth, our subconscious, not to mention our nativity scenes and favorite carols reinforces this image of Mary as meek and mild.

In so many ways, well meaning, smart Christians have fallen into this trap time and time again. Hard to believe? I thought so too until last year when this was made most clear to me right here in the sacristy of St. C’s. This walk in closet of a room is often a place of honest, holy reflection and last Christmas Eve was no exception. Me and the cast members for the morning Christmas pageant were readying ourselves for our matinee performance. Now in this instance the cast all happened to be phenomenal young women from our eldest youth group – YAC. They were all in a circle discussing the play when one of them turned to me and said to me “An all female cast and Mary has no lines. What’s going on here?” It was clear that what they were talking about was the silencing of Mary in her own story!

What do you say when a group of teenage girls calls you out for being complicit in patriarchal messaging, you do what I did ... “I know right? What were *they* thinking?” Totally deflect and shift accountability.

Youth Group members are doing the Christmas pageant once again this year for Wee Worship and I am happy to report that this year Mary has some lines! But is that enough – giving Mary some lines in the Nativity play? Turns out not even close. You and I need to go back to the beginning to correct our faulty lens – and when I say beginning I mean to the beginning beginning back when the Earth was formless and void and the Spirit of God hovered over creation. It is this image that the writer of Luke wanted the reader to think about when Mary is told that she will become pregnant when the “power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Throughout the Old Testament God’s presence is often conceived of as a light hidden in a cloud so as not to overpower people. The early readers of this text would’ve gotten this allusion. Ohhh God’s going to overshadow Mary – the way God overshadowed Moses, the way God

overshadowed the people of Israel in the wilderness, the way God overshadowed the tabernacle. It would've made sense to the writer and early hearers that God overshadowing Mary was not some sinister sounding sexual reference, but as the mechanism by which God has acted mightily in the past, as a way that God was acting mightily once more.

The writer of Luke was not too terribly concerned with the sexual mechanics of Jesus' conception – he was concerned with conveying to people that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. That Jesus was Divine. The best way to do that was to weave in the words of the Prophet Isaiah and link instances of Jesus' life to that prophecy.

The first way for Luke (and Matthew for that matter,) to validate Jesus' divinity was to declare that his mother was the virgin that the prophet Isaiah spoke about. Here's the problem – Isaiah never prophesied that a virgin would have a son. Isaiah prophesied that a young unmarried woman would have a son. You see when the Hebrew bible was translated into Greek for the Greek speaking Jews in the Greco-Roman world, the Hebrew word *Almah* was translated into *Parthenos* which came to mean virgin, not young unmarried woman. So Luke was under the assumption that for Jesus to be the Messiah that Isaiah talked about, he had to be born of a virgin, but for Jesus to be the Messiah he just had to be born of a young woman.

Now I am not taking a position on whether Mary was a virgin or not. My own opinion is that nothing is impossible for God. So sure why not, but also physiological conception is itself a miracle. Either way I look at it – I see a miracle. But in conversation with people I've heard time and again that the issue of the virgin birth has been a stumbling block. Since they can't believe in a virgin birth, they can't take Jesus seriously. If you find yourself to be one of those in that camp let me just say your stumbling block, is really just a misunderstanding from someone who was doing his very best to convey that something momentous had happened that had changed his and his friend's lives forever.

Mary's virginal status never really mattered much to me, but for centuries her virginal status signaled Mary's purity for all the world to see. It's as if centuries of male theologians felt the need to justify the fact that God chose a woman to be the mother of Jesus. What's stunning is that the writer of Luke himself felt no need. In the writing of Mary here and her exchange with Gabriel we see echoes of God's interactions with the most revered and prominent figures of the faith.

In her book "In Search of Mary" Sally Cunneen quotes the observations made by feminist scholar Alice Laffey. Laffey observes significant similarities between Mary's call story and that of Abraham and Moses. There's only three people in all of Scripture who hear "Fear not" and you have "found favor" with God in the same conversation – Mary and Abraham are two out of the three. (Gideon is the third.) Mary's conversation also has echoes with Moses and the burning bush. Both Moses and Mary ask – "how can this be?" and push back on the angel until they get a satisfactory answer and give their assent. In light of these similarities Laffey asks "Is not the literary structure of God's call of Mary to become the mother of Jesus similar [to that of

Abraham and Moses?]" Yet exegetes have played down the importance of Mary's prophetic response [...] and focused instead on the angel's announcement.

The writer of Luke was giving Mary the prominence and credibility of Moses and Abraham. Biblical figures whose mere presence ushered in a whole new era for God's people. It makes complete sense. It's such an obvious connection – so how could I have missed it for so long. Rather than being anti-feminist by portraying Mary as this pious, virgin the writer of Luke was linking Mary to the ultimate fathers of the the faith – Moses and Abraham.

Does this make Mary perfect?... Not if Mary's call is in keeping with God's pattern. One of the most compelling and profound elements of Biblical call stories is how little they depend on people's worthiness. Abraham doesn't become the father of many nations because he is particularly wise, wealthy or noble. In fact the more we get to know him in Scripture, the more average he appears. With mistakes and sins like the rest of us. When God calls Moses he is an inarticulate outlaw. God doesn't choose people because of anything they do, God chooses people because God sees fit to do so and then God empowers them and stays close to them as they continue on their journey.

Time and again in people's commentaries on Mary they interpret the angels "Greetings favored one!" to mean that Mary must have done something exceptional or extraordinary to deserve God's favor. But if that were the case that would have been out of character for how God acts in Scripture. We don't know why God chose Mary – but let us not read into her call story a double standard that we apply to none of the other Fathers of the Faith.

Abraham and Moses were imperfect, one can safely assume Mary was imperfect too. I can get behind this Mary... and from here on out I will. As the Gospel stories share - Mary may have started out as just an ordinary woman chosen by God but she proved herself to be extraordinary, fierce and faithful. God doesn't choose perfect people. Not 2,000 years ago, not now. And for that I give great thanks cause there's hope for us yet! Amen.