



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ What's In A Name?

The Rev. Karin Hejmanowski ~ August 21, 2011

Two weeks ago we took a look at Esther, a young woman whose bravery and willingness to look beyond her own well-being to the safety and well-being of others was impressive. Her start as an orphan was overshadowed by her rise to the position of queen due to her beauty and her gracious manner. Though the meaning of her name is somewhat debated, the life she lived has filled the name Esther with meaning for the ages.

That week we talked about what it looks like to fill our own name with meaning. What will those around you or those who come after you remember about you and associate with your name because of the way you lived your life? It's a question worth considering, I think. It's a sort of starting with the end in mind, you might say.

This week we continue by looking at another young woman whose name is worthy of being given over and over again. A young woman whose ability to respond with grace to the most troubling of circumstances at a young age is amazing. And whose tender grace much later in life is awe-inspiring. Our brothers and sisters in the Catholic tradition would be quick to say that we give her short shrift at best. Let's listen together as we hear part of her story as it comes to us from Luke 1:26–38.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Now it may seem odd to hear this passage at a time other than late November or sometime in December—a time other than advent, that is. But it's an amazing story no matter what time it is. So it's not merely that I'll be on maternity leave and miss any chance of preaching on Mary then. It's more that she's so amazing she deserves more than to be pigeon-holed in December. Those of you who share her name surely agree!

Now the meaning of Mary, as given on websites, is about as debated as the meaning of Esther. It can mean “sea of bitterness or sorrow” or ‘rebellion’ or ‘lady of the sea’. But surely its fullest and best meaning are, as was true for Esther, born out in the life of the mother of Jesus rather than confined to a few words on a page.

We all know that many girls grow up dreaming about their wedding day. When the time actually arrives to plan a wedding, they already have a picture in the mind of what it will look like. Some already know how many children they want to have and a few may have already picked out names for those children...which is why some names become creative when gender is not as expected. I have an Uncle Carl, but my mom, born two children before him, was named Karleen. Perhaps you've heard from your parents what you would have been named had you been the other gender. I know I would have been Brian.

Mary, too, may have grown up with such thoughts and dreams. Women were married much, much younger back in those days. Likely she had wondered and thought about who she might be married to—someone who would be mostly picked by her parents and likely significantly older than she. After learning she would be married to Joseph, the dreams could take further shape. They would set up their home together. They would have perfect cabinets and furniture since he was a carpenter...or perhaps their cabinets would forever lack the final touches since he would be so busy helping others that their own home would have those annoying or endearing oversights that would forever be on the to-do list.

In time they would have children . . . maybe she knew how many she or they wanted or maybe that didn't matter to her.

But then reality jumped into view and it was not a reality she could have envisioned. In fact, it was a reality so unusual that it must have felt like a dream. She and Joseph were not yet married, nor intimate in their relationship, but an angel appeared to her and told her she was going to have a baby. A pregnancy before marriage came with more questions and disapproving looks and a whole lot more shame than a teenage pregnancy today. And unlike my friends in my younger years who bravely chose to give up their child for adoption, the angel made it clear that she was to keep the child. In fact, he would not be named after her fiancé, Joseph. There would be no calling him Joe Jr., there would be no discussion of what to call him at all. The angel tells her that she will name the baby Jesus.

Mary inquires how all this will be possible since she is not yet married. The angel answers her, but in a way that seems as much an un-answer as an answer. It doesn't really explain it at all. But somehow it is all fine with Mary. She has a faith that allows her to respond with amazing grace.

The angel sets the birth of Jesus in historical context. Jesus will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be given the throne of David. He will reign over the house of

Jacob forever. To us those are references that we know sound important. To understand them more we might need to do a study on Jacob and David. But although girls in that time were not as schooled as boys, every Jewish girl would have known the stories of King David. King David who built up the Kingdom of Israel. King David whom God called a man after God's own heart. King David was revered and honored. He represented the Kingdom of Israel at its best, at its height. And here she was, a young girl, being told that her son would be greater than he. Unbelievable. Unless you have the faith of the young Jewish girl whom we know simply as Mary.

Mary, perhaps working to commit each of the angel's words to memory so that she could ponder all these things for the months and years to come, simply says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And that was it. That was it for her interaction with the angel, but just the beginning of a new and very different journey from the one she had expected.

The next days or weeks must have been rough. She told Joseph, her fiancé, what had happened. And it was inevitable that it would begin to be obvious that she was expecting. And everyone knew she wasn't yet married. Joseph had every right to have her stoned, killed, for unfaithfulness. But he had decided to quietly end the relationship. He loved her too much to allow her to be killed, but he had no explanation for her pregnancy and her story about an angel had to seem unlikely. Can you imagine the angst of those weeks as they talked. As she pleaded with him to believe her. I'm sure they both lost sleep. I'm sure they both saw their dreams of their life together just falling apart. And she found herself facing life as a single mother. Would her parents allow her to live with them? How would she make ends meet? Why didn't the angel take care of this part of her story?

Well, God did take care of that part of their story. Joseph also had a visit by an angel in a dream who confirmed Mary's unlikely story. And so Joseph stayed. Eventually they married and raised Jesus together. But Mary was ready to be faithful in her relationship with God whether the circumstances were favorable or not.

I love that Mary seemed to have space in her life to receive the visit by the angel. We don't know much about her background, but we can see that she was dedicated to a life of faithfulness. She was open to the movement of the Spirit of God in her life, though she surely had no idea how amazing and difficult and joy-giving and heart-wrenching that would turn out to be. We hear very little about Jesus and, therefore, Mary, for the years of his childhood until his public ministry begins around age 30. We don't know whether it was a dream or an extra challenge to parent the Son of God! He had siblings, too, so who knows how sibling rivalry played out. I know what it is to have a popular, great athlete for an older brother, but that's still a far cry from living with the divine! Who knows whether they took the first-century version of Love and Logic Parenting classes. No doubt she exchanged parenting stories with friends, but how similar was it raising other children and raising Jesus?

But the years went by. And we have but two stories of Mary. In one she kicks off his public ministry, seemingly prematurely, by basically promising that Jesus would do something to solve the lack of wine at a wedding they were attending. And so he did.

But our next picture is not so amusing. Listen to this scenario at the end of Jesus' life as we read it in John 19:23–27.

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfill what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.' And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

In another passage that records events before the birth of Jesus, Mary had been told that a sword would pierce her own heart also. But how could a young girl, so full of dreams, imagine that parenthood could possibly be so painful? No one foresaw, nor did she that the Son of God would not just reign on the throne of David, but would also be crucified, killed. That's not the way it was supposed to happen.

And yet here she was, watching it happen before her very eyes. Because he is not mentioned in this passage nor elsewhere in stories of Jesus, historians assume that Joseph, Jesus' earthly father was no longer living. Culturally it's easy to assume that he was significantly older than Mary, so this makes it further likely that he was no longer living.

Here we see Jesus, not far from his last breath, looking lovingly at his mother and seeking both to take care of her and make her feel loved. John was standing there, of course. He was the disciple whom we know as the one most loved by Jesus (never mind that it's him that tells us it's so!). Jesus, in this moment, redefines John's relationship with Mary. He declares them mother and son. In so doing, Jesus is being sure that his mother will be well cared for. John, as a disciple of Jesus, would do anything Jesus asked of him. And surely taking care of Jesus' mother would be a high honor. And so Mary is, from that point forward, cared for by John. This scene at the cross is our final picture of Mary in Scripture. The once-so-young mother of the Son of God here relinquishes her dreams once more. Previously it was relinquishing the dream of what marriage and motherhood would look like and when it would begin. Now it is letting go of her son once more. Trusting once again that God was in control and all would be well. Not that it would be what she hoped, imagined, or even wanted. But that somehow it was okay.

Surely we can't put ourselves fully into the shoes of Mary, the mother of Jesus. But it's not hard to begin to imagine at least some of her emotions as a young girl and then again as a mother standing at the foot of the cross.

Mary. The name remains in the top 100 for good reason. Not because books say it means 'rebellion', but because the story of her life is so gracious and so amazing. To speak that into someone's life could only be a blessing.

We don't venerate saints as our Catholic brothers and sisters do. We don't honor them in special ways. But perhaps the meaning of Mary's name is best captured in the much-repeated first phrase of the Hail Mary...Hail Mary, full of grace.

I reread the story of Mary's life and I wonder where those places are in my life where God is calling me to let go of expectations. I wonder if I'm making room in my life to hear God's voice speak a new reality into existence. Where are my dreams too small or where are they misdirected? And where might the pain of letting go be transformational for myself or others? Corie TenBoom who hid Jews in WWII and then spent time in a concentration camp told her pastor years later as his children ran around her legs which were not as strong as they used to be, "hold all things loosely."

Mary. A life well lived. A life of graciously holding all dreams and all things loosely. And a life that calls us to consider where God is calling us to hold things loosely. Perhaps so a new dream might be born. Perhaps for reasons we won't know for some time to come. Mary. Full of Grace. A life well lived. Amen.