

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/18/2011, Advent 4B
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38
Mary, the Mother of Our Lord

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁸And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38, RSV)

My dear old pastor Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory, once mentioned that the older he got, the more affection he had for Mary, the Mother of Our Lord. I think many of us could say the same thing, for we admire that "handmaid of the Lord." Her faith seems more innocent and steadier than ours. I wish my faith were more like hers.

In his affection for Mary, Pastor Shaheen was walking in the spirit of Martin Luther of old, who admired Mary throughout his life.

At a wedding reception a good number of years ago now, I found myself seated beside a young teacher from a New England Roman Catholic boarding school. His task was to teach theology to high school students, and he struck me as earnest about his responsibilities. He asked me a question that would intrigue many Lutheran clergy: Could I recommend *one* treatise by Luther for him and his students to study? So, here I was being given a chance to shape the introduction of Roman Catholic young people to Luther. It did not take me long to settle on my choice. I urged that they study Luther's treatise on *The Magnificat* -- Mary's song of praise at bearing the Christ Child.

Partly it was the love of language that inclined me toward this particular treatise. I wanted these students to experience something of the power and beauty of Luther's writing. I wanted them to be moved by such passages as this one about Mary:

Oh, how simple and pure a heart was hers, how strange a soul was this!
What great things are hidden here under this lowly exterior! How many
came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who
perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple
village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in
terror. (LW 21:329)

But there was more to my recommendation of this particular treatise than my joy and pride in Luther's powers of expression. The chief thing is that I take Luther's treatise on *The Magnificat* to be a paradigm of evangelical appropriation of catholic substance. This little treatise illustrates for us that Luther was not one to "throw the baby out with the bath water." Everything we could want in terms of

guarding against works righteousness is to be found in Luther's treatise on Mary, yet Martin Luther's proper critique of medieval developments in Marian piety did not lead him to abandon the poor girl. Just the reverse: his brilliant instincts and insights about the faith of the church permitted him to praise Mary in a pure way and to elevate her in the only way she herself wanted to be elevated: as one who humbly points to her Son and urges us, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, *do it.*" (John 2:5, KJV) So, in this sermon, I want to join Luther in praise of this humble village maid, Mary, the Mother of our Lord.

To do so, I wish to lift up two sayings from today's Gospel Reading. One speaks of the Lord's presence in the life of Mary. The other speaks of Mary's beautiful example of conformity to the word of God. My theme is that you and I are kin to Mary. We too enjoy God's presence in our lives and we have the same real freedom to be good that she has. Whether or not we are good is up *to us*. That is the great story of our lives. But that we *can* be good is solid, for God is with us.

So, the first saying comes from the angel Gabriel, who greets Mary with these words:

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, *the Lord is with you!*"

Gabriel himself comes and goes. Mary's conversation with him is but a passing event early on in her life. But that the Lord is "with her" is a blessing that lasts for all her life. That the Lord is "Immanuel" for her - God "with her" - is a lifetime blessing, not only for her, but also, through baptism, for you and me.

The other saying I want to lift up is her consent to these strange doings. I think we can well admire her for the way she phrased things:

³⁸And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me *according to your word.*" (Luke 1:38, RSV)

Let all ordinary hopes and dreams pass away. Mary is content so long as the word of the Lord can be accomplished in her life.

So, these two points: The Lord is with Mary. And Mary desires the word of the Lord above all else. Let's begin with the Lord's presence with Mary.

The Lord's presence

God willing, eventually our Monday Evening Psalm Class is going to reach Psalm 138. When we do, we will encounter this great line:

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly... (Psalm 138:6, RSV)

In heaven above, I imagine there are many wonderful things to gaze upon. Think of those marvelous six-winged seraphim Isaiah talks about (Isaiah 6), along with the angels and the archangels. It would be natural for the eye to be drawn to those heavenly host. Or, with the Lord's clarity of vision, he could gaze upon distant galaxies, with all their stars and moons and wonders. There are many glorious and fetching things our Maker *could* gaze upon, and yet, if we could follow the direction of his eyes, we would find them by-passing the glories of heaven and of earth and searching the highway and byways of this world for the lowly. Our eyes tend to drift toward the kings and presidents and beautiful people of this earth, but the LORD looks for the lowly. Gabriel, then, tells Mary the awesome news that if we follow the line of sight of the Lord's eyes, we would find them looking down on *her*. He regards her with affection.

But there is more: Not only does the Lord "regard" Mary, but also he is "with" her. He is "Immanuel" for her, which is a dear word for us in our church: "Immanuel" -- God with us! At a minimum, I think we must conclude that the Lord is present in the life of Mary in such a way that if he were not, everything would be different for that young woman. Here she is, a humble village maiden, doubtless preoccupied with thoughts of her coming marriage to Joseph, imagining and planning their life together as young people do, and all along, the Lord is with her. He is not obtrusive, nor condemning. She lives the life of a young person, and her Maker is with her as she does it.

I think I can specify the way in which the Lord is with Mary: he grants her freedom to be good. And, God bless her, she chooses the good. In this dear story, we see Mary exercising her God-given freedom to stand with the Lord. No wonder Joseph loved her!

St. Paul says that if the Lord is for us, then all else must step aside. All else must bend the knee before the Lord's good will:

³¹If God be for us, who can be against us?... ³⁸For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8, KJV)

In his conversation with young Mary, Gabriel expresses the same good point:

³⁶And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷*For with God nothing will be impossible.*” (Luke 1:36-37, RSV)

What we find in Mary is that *it is possible* to be good. No matter how humble and no-account we might otherwise be, the Lord above gazes all the way down to us, to regard us with affection, and to grant us freedom for goodness. Mary illustrates someone who takes the Lord’s presence in her life and runs with it. She runs her race well.

The reason I am emphasizing the presence of the Lord in the life of Mary is that *to us* too, to you and to me, this divine presence has been granted. It is the blessing of Baptism. Christ is present to us in our faith. When we were baptized, God claimed us as his own children. We became Christ’s man, woman, boy, girl. He promised never to fail us nor forsake us. (Hebrews 13:5) And so we are kin to Mary. She is not some miracle off yonder. She is not alien to us. She is not a different species of humanity. She is what we are: people blessed to have God with us. If she differs from us, it is only that we have not yet enjoyed and employed as well as she did the freedom God grants us day by day, hour by hour.

We have been baptized! Or we are welcome to be baptized. Henceforth, we do not wander through this life alone, but we have the Lord with us, protecting us and granting us freedom to be good. So we can do what Mary did. In face of any particular sin tempting us, we have freedom, granted by the Lord, to turn and walk away.

Second, she desired the word of the Lord

Now, let’s turn to our second point about Mary: she desired the word of the Lord above all else. She meant to be true to that word, however strange that word is, and no matter the harm to her reputation or the expectations natural to a young woman engaged for marriage. She meant to cling to the word of the Lord.

In this, she is the opposite of Adam and Eve in the Garden. In his magnificent eight-volume commentary on Genesis, Luther points out that the serpent exploits a certain truth about humanity: fresh from God’s hands and ever afterwards, we are built for words. We are vulnerable to words. We can be inspired by them, and we can be tempted by them. The serpent, Luther says, uses words to attack the Word:

Did God really command you not to eat from every tree of Paradise?

Accordingly, Moses expresses himself very carefully and says: “The serpent *said*,” that is, with a word it attacks the Word. The Word which the Lord had spoken to Adam was: “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” For Adam this Word was Gospel and Law; it was his worship; it was his service and the obedience he could

offer God in this state of innocence. These Satan attacks and tries to destroy. (LW 1:146)

Luther, then, goes on to imagine the devilish discourse:

Surely you are silly if you believe that God has given such a command, for it is not God's nature to be so deeply concerned whether you eat or not. Inasmuch as it is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, how can such ill will come upon Him that He does not want you to be wise? (LW 1:149)

Likewise with young Mary, we can imagine the tempting words breaking into her mind when Gabriel speaks of her pregnancy. Thick and sharp as hail in a hailstorm, such thoughts could have force themselves upon her:

But this is an impossibility! It is a physiological impossibility, for I am a virgin. And it is an appalling possibility for my marriage. How will my beloved Joseph ever make sense of my pregnancy? Why, it is even a moral impossibility, a bad example to the world and destructive of holy marriage.

And the devil, being more clever than me, no doubt phrased the tempting thoughts more powerfully than this.

But Mary fought her way through such storms of words and yielded to what seemed quite clear her: the angel of the Lord stood before her, bringing the very word of God to her, and she meant to yield to that word.

Our similar position

Do you see how similar our position is to that of this dear saint, Mary the mother of Our Lord? Like her, the Lord above is *with us*. Indeed, soon we will bend the knee once again at the foot of the cross at Golgotha, and we will hear those dear words, "My body, my blood, are for you!"

And like her, the Lord has a Word or two for us. The world listening in might think that Word to be unreasonable, extravagant, and unlikely to make us rich or famous. But no matter. Gabriel himself might as well be standing before us and urging such divine Words upon us: "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods. Thou shalt not take my name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Love thy neighbor as thyself."

If our sister in the Lord, Mary, were to speak to us even this very moment, we know well what she would say to us. She would urge the path she herself walked. She would commend the self-surrender she herself practiced. She would cherish the Word and ask us to make place for it in our lives:

Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. (John 2:5, KJV)

And in this way, she would call us into the discipleship she herself followed all the way to the foot of the cross, all the way to Pentecost, and all the way home one day to her Saviour, her Son, our Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.