

Sermon December 11, 2022

Luke 1:26-38

“The Immaculate Conception?”

Mary has been given numerous titles over the course of the church’s history. In the earliest years she was referred to as Second Eve, just as Jesus was called second Adam, the idea being that just as sin was brought into the world by Adam and Eve, redemption came through Jesus and Mary. She has also been called Mother of God and Queen of Heaven. Another title is well known, but often misunderstood, i.e., Immaculate Conception. This was a belief that first arose in the second century, was debated for centuries, but did not become official dogma in the Roman Catholic Church until 1854. Many think that this refers to the virgin birth of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. But what it really means is that when Mary was conceived in her mother’s womb, she was relieved of the taint of Original Sin. This made her an appropriate vessel in which to carry the Christ Child. So, in that sense it does have to do with the birth of Jesus.

She has also been referred to in Christian history as the Ark of the Covenant. Why?

In the 40th chapter of Exodus the tent of meeting called the tabernacle, which contains the Ark, is filled with “the glory of God”. In the story of Gabriel’s visit to Mary she is told she will be overshadowed by the power of the Most High and give birth to a child. God’s presence is with the Ark and present within Mary. Also, just as the Ark contained life giving bread, Mary has within her the true Bread of Life. Just as the Ark contains the Ten Commandments, Mary carries the child that will become the fulfillment of the law, and just as the Ark holds the staff of the first High Priest, Jesus will be declared High Priest in the Book of Hebrews.

Add to that, in 2 Samuel, being in awe of the presence of the Lord, David says, “How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?”. Then when David came into the presence of the Ark he leaped and danced. In the Gospel of Luke, when Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, is visited by Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, the not yet born, John the Baptist, leaped in his mother’s womb.

These are just a few of the comparisons which led to Mary being called the Ark of the Covenant - Albeit a New Covenant! I mention all of this because within the gospels Mary, or Miriam as she was called in the Greek, was very much a flesh and blood figure, but she is also a symbol in various ways. Calling her the Ark of the Covenant symbolizes her as that which stands in the presence of the Lord, and bears within her that which is most Holy, which says while she is the visible symbol, it is that within her that is the primary focus of the metaphor.

Another example would be that she is sometimes referred to as a type of the church. Her obedience in accepting the call to bear the child and declaring herself a servant of the Lord are declarations of faith mirroring the church's call to obedience and acceptance of servitude through acts of faith.

This morning's reading begins by saying, "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". When it says "In the sixth month" it is not referring to the month of June, but the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Then it says that a virgin was engaged to a man named Joseph. As I pointed out in a recent email posting she was not engaged in the same sense that we understand engagement. In that time and place a girl became betrothed, usually around the age of 12 or 13, and was then considered married, but she would continue living in her parents' home, without intimate relations with the husband, and then move in with him after one year. So, it is in that first year of betrothal that Mary asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

In verse 28, Gabriel, the messenger angel, says, "Greetings, favored one!" In the original Greek the opening word does not actually mean "greetings" but rather, rejoice. That's important because what Gabriel is announcing is the imminent arrival of the long-expected Messiah- the beginning of the Messianic Era, therefore, a time to rejoice!

Our reading today is immediately followed by what is known as Mary's Song, or the Magnificat, which gives us a clue as to what the Messianic Era is supposed to be, that is, the kingdom of God, which is both present within us, but yet to be fulfilled.

What we can take away from this is not only the mission of Jesus, first proclaimed by his mother, but, also, a recognition that “What he has done for this lowly woman of Galilee he will do for all of us through his Son: meet us in our own lowliness, poverty, weakness, and suffering and do “great things” for us.” (Edward Sri) It also awakens the church to its own mission, to advocate for social, economic and racial justice, to call out for peace in our homes, our communities, our churches, and the world, to truly be about the business of letting the oppressed go free!”

It is unfortunate that there are really a few times that we talk about Mary in our Protestant churches. As I've said before, essentially pushing her out the door of our churches was one of the biggest mistakes of the Reformation. Again, she is a type of the church, that is, a sign and symbol of what the church is supposed to be, filled with love and compassion, courage and faith. Her intercession with her Son at the wedding in Cana and her compassion and courage standing at the foot her Son's cross typifies what the Christian heart is meant to be. And her vision described in the Magnificat is a foretelling of the coming kingdom of God, central to her Son's preaching and teaching. And her presence in the upper room on the day of Pentecost carries forward Jesus' vision for the world and crowns her with the title, Mother of the Church. As Protestants we are under no obligation to believe things such as the Immaculate Conception, But we can still look to Mary as a model and example of what true faith is all about. Amen.

Let us pray: God of grace and mercy, as always, we are grateful for your holy presence and for the guidance and inspiration we receive through your Holy Spirit, and for our recognition of the depths of divine compassion revealed in your Son Jesus. On this third Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention to the mother of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and see in her a sublime example of faith. Through her obedient trust in you she became not only the mother of the Lord, but mother of the church as well. Following her example may we find such faith kindled in us and ask your aid in the growth and strength of that faith. Through Mary we also begin to see the possibility of a new world, a world to be fulfilled in and through your Son, a more just world of greater equality and freedom, a world where hunger is a thing of the past, a world devoid of needless and pointless violence. Give to us, Holy One, the faith needed to strive towards the realization of such a world. Amen.