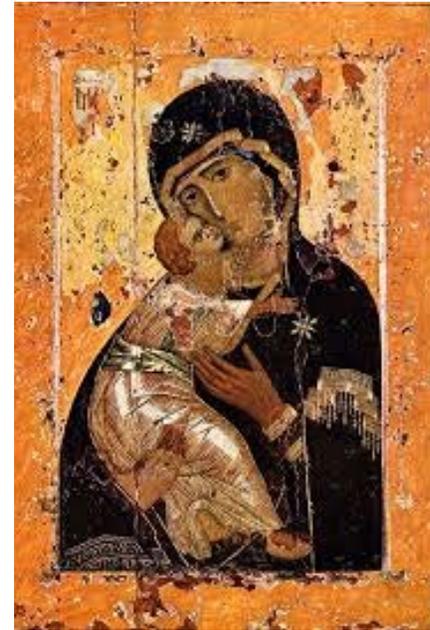


Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector



SONG OF MARY

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-4, 8-11; Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55); John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sermon text: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generation will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. Luke 1:46-47

I want to show you something.

This is a reproduction of the icon of the Virgin of Vladimir, also known as “Our Lady of Tenderness.” It is one of the most venerated of all Russian icons. According to Henri Nouwen, who writes about it in his wonderful book on praying with icons, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (chapter 2; copies are available at the back of the church), “It was painted by an anonymous Greek artist at the beginning of the 12th century. Around the year 1183 it was brought from Constantinople to Kiev, and about 20 years later from Kiev to Vladimir where it stayed until 1395. Although the icon has been in Moscow for the past six centuries, it is still called “The Virgin of Vladimir.” This sacred treasure has miraculously escaped many fires and plunderers. It has undergone several restorations, yet the faces of the mother and child are still those of the original Byzantine masterpiece.”

This Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Rose Sunday. There is an association with the Blessed Virgin Mary (along with John the Baptist). So this morning Peter sang a traditional setting of the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-58; Canticle 15 in the Prayer Book) as part of our readings. The Song of Mary is also known as the *Magnificat*, from its first word in the Latin Vulgate translation of St Jerome. The soul of Mary magnifies or proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

Mary's young heart burst out in song after greeting her older cousin Elizabeth, as the evangelist Luke tells the story. Earlier, the archangel Gabriel paid her a visit. "Hail, O favored one," he began (from whence we get, "Ave Maria"), "the Lord is with you!" He went on to tell her that she will conceive a son to be named Jesus, who will be the child of the Most High. How can this be, she asked, for I am still a virgin. The Holy Spirit will come in power, explained the angel. I am the handmaiden of the Lord, Mary replied, let it be according to your word.

As you might imagine, especially considering that Mary was a young woman, probably 15 or 16 years old, she was unsure of what to think or feel after the angel left. It wasn't until she made a trip to visit Elizabeth, and was met at the door by her cousin, who exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Elizabeth went to say that the child in her womb, the future John the Baptist, had leapt for joy on sensing the nearness of his Lord, the promised one. It is only then, having had human confirmation of the angelic witness, that Mary sings her song of exaltation.

So it is that although each of us might bear a distinct word of God, have a vision from an angel, still it helps to have another person hear the story, and say you are not alone, you are not crazy. Each of us has encounters with the divine, as I have come to find out, and it is good to share them with a wise counselor.

Now the Magnificat takes as its literary model earlier women's songs of triumph in the Bible, from Miriam's song after the crossing of the Red Sea, through Deborah's after victory in battle, and, especially, the song of Hannah at the miraculous conception, late in life, of her son, Samuel (1 Samuel 2). The songs are similar in their praise of God for delivering Israel from the hand of its enemies, for righting wrongs and establishing justice, for pulling the proud and rich from positions of unjust advantage and lifting up the lowly. For answering the prayers of people who put their trust in God.

Although these songs are victory songs, the Bible in great measure is the recorded history of a people oppressed by mightier powers. Often the individuals praying in the psalms were personally in anguish, close to death, feeling alone, overwhelmed. But their prayers are answered. God does and has and will come and deliver the people. This is what Mary sings—her song is the very epitome of faith in God and trust in the eventual triumph of justice. She is a true daughter of Israel and a prophetic voice.

But more than this, Mary will come to represent all believers, and even the Church as a whole. As the "Agreed Statement" on Mary of the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission puts it, "Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, stands before us as an exemplar of faithful obedience, and her "Be it to me according to your word" is the grace-filled response each of us is called to make to God, both personally and communally, as the Church, the body of Christ. It is as figure of the Church, her arms uplifted in prayer and praise, her hands open in receptivity and availability to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that we are one with Mary as she magnifies the Lord. "Surely," Mary declares in her song recorded in the Gospel of Luke, "from this day all generations will call me blessed."

Well, if the Anglicans, of whom we are the American branch, and the Catholics, and the Orthodox can agree on the veneration of Mary, that is a hopeful sign. After all, the Reformation has brought about a division on the status of Mary, with many Protestants leery of excessive Marian devotion—and especially of making the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary into dogmas, required teaching, (these are relatively recent developments: 1847 and 1950 respectively). Protestants worry about making Mary the co-mediator of salvation—whereas scripture tells us Jesus Christ is our only mediator, our Savior and Lord. But recently, as the Agreed Statement shows, both churches are slowly beginning to recognize common ground, to agree on certain points, while agreeing to disagree on others. Amid all the division of the world and the churches, this is surely something to celebrate.

Thanks, blessed Mary, Mother of God—that's her title among creedal churches—God-bearer, *theotokos*. For surely Mary, in heaven with her son, is pleading for us, for our peace and health, as a mother for her children, as our older sister in faith. Here she is, bearing the child. This icon, set against a piece of the fabric that used to screen the brick behind the chapel altar (Fr Elliott informed me that this fabric is known as a dossal), will now hang there, at least for a season, helping us in our prayers. Praying to God in Christ together with Mary seems particularly appropriate this season. Notice how Mary looks with such inward and profound love toward us. See her eyes. While her freehand gestures tenderly toward her child, the Son of God, inviting us to come closer, and to do as he says (as she told the servants in the miracle at the wedding of Cana). And the child Jesus is portrayed really as a man, whose radiant face leans in and his lips softly kiss those of his mother. His large neck is a conventional sign of the power of the Holy Spirit, as he gently breathes on her the love of God for all humanity. She is the sign and exemplar of humanity as beloved by God, and humanity as responsive and obedient to God's call. Let it be, she sang (Paul McCartney set a beautiful tune to it) . Let us all sing with her and rejoice always in the love and justice of our God, and the joy of his coming in the form of a humble baby, born of Mary, blessed among women. Let us all say, Amen to the Yes of Jesus, Let it be according to your Word.

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¹Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord; Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, Indiana, Ave Maria Press, 1987), 31-32.

² Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, 2004. Find it here.