

Mary Barnett

Mary, the mother of God is depicted in famous paintings of the Annunciation with alabaster skin in interior settings on fine furniture bathed in a halo. A lily bending on a long stem in the background. Sometimes, slightly recoiling, she seems alarmed. Sometimes, wonderstruck, she bends slightly forward. But either way always reacting with her whole being to the presence of the glory of lord that is . . . *an angel*. And finally, *yes*, she says, *yes yes yes yes* to what it is that God is asking of her, accepting in deep humility a reality that is beyond her comprehension.

It is a beautiful image with deep wisdom in it for us. Especially in Advent: this season of incubation, of waiting and of wonder. Mary is called the God bearer, the *Theotokos* in the rich Eastern Orthodox tradition. Her body, her whole being, become an archetype for all subsequent holding environments for God. Sanctuaries and cathedrals and the mother church herself are all modeled on Mary. *I am the Lord's servant*, Mary says. *May your word to me be fulfilled*. And then, the angel departs. And *Mary gets up and goes with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth*.

Those are very ACTIVE verbs. We met a *very different Mary here* than we see in Renaissance paintings. This Mary has agency and urgency. She knows what she needs. She knows where to get it.

But first let's go back to the beginning. In the Lectionary, the story of Mary and Elizabeth is fractured. We hear bits and pieces over a three-year cycle. We lose the thread. This obscures important elements of the story *as a story* which (what do you think, Eric?) means we need to start a Bible study again.

The story begins at the very start of the Gospel of Luke. Zechariah, an elderly Jewish priest on temple duty, is burning some incense when he is visited by the power and glory of God, which again is an angel. (The same angel that will visit Mary six months hence.) Gabriel tells Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth, who is very old and who has spent a long lifetime ostracized for being infertile, will finally have a baby.

Now it's helpful to remember that women without children were a cause of scorn in the ancient world. And infertility is often an unrecognized or misunderstood or obscured suffering in ours. There was zero understanding at the time that a man's infertility might be part of the problem.

Unsurprisingly, Zechariah finds it a bit difficult to believe that his elderly wife Elizabeth is finally going to have a baby. And God strikes him dumb for his lack of faith. He remains unable to speak for nine long months. The entire time Elizabeth is pregnant. Imagine! And yet what might God be asking him to make room for with this period of silence? Is there something unexpected that Zechariah might be called to give birth to?

In any case, because of Zechariah's silence, his formerly shunned and silenced wife gets to give a fine little speech explaining what happened to her stunned community. And then she retreats into a five-month confinement in the hills, cooped up in the house with a husband who does not talk to her the entire time. And she's pregnant, at like what? 50, 60, 68, 80? What was *that* like?

Meanwhile Mary, Elizabeth's very young, very poor, very unwed cousin is visited by the same angel Gabriel who tells her she has been chosen to give birth to the son of God. Mary is alarmed, stunned, overwhelmed, but she says yes. And then what happens? The angel departs and Mary gets up, metaphorically pulls on her big-girl pants, straps on her walking sandals and takes a hike up into the hill country because she needs to talk to a friend. She needs to find and talk to her cousin Elizabeth about having a baby.

Imagine the determination, the long walk in the hot sun, the thirst. And when Mary finally gets there, Elizabeth's baby, who will become John the Baptist, leaps in her womb, because he *and* his mother ALREADY both recognize the God in Mary. And this, *this* is what allows Mary to own this good news and to open her mouth and *sing* about it to the whole world.

And so, Mary stays for three whole months. She must have liked it there. Mary stays and no doubt helps deliver Elizabeth's baby. And then Mary gets up and walks back down the long road to the town of Nazareth, perhaps more ready to explain her condition to her community.

Why is it so hard for us today and during the long history of religion to stay with these women in these crisis moments, to see BOTH their vulnerability and their agency? To come alongside these two women whose bodies are already full of God, of the Good News, *and they know it*.

I want to give them our full attention

As we slowly adapt our prayer book to better reflect our understanding that God is not a controlling man or really big woman in the sky, we want to bring forward the voices that have been obscured: women active in leadership roles the early church, the female mystics of medieval times, the humanity and mystery of Mary, the heights and width and breadth of a God beyond gender. These are resources already available to us.

And I wonder:

Have you ever felt invisible?

Felt overlooked because you made people uncomfortable?

(Haven't most of us had this experience in one situation or another?)

Have you been discounted because you don't have children?

Or only valued because you do?

Have you felt ignored because you are older or younger than people expected?

Or because you struggle with your health, your weight, your height, or your pocketbook?

Have you been talked down to or avoided because you are a person of color or been seen as a stereotype?

In the Catholic tradition, Mary is revered but often rendered passive or one-dimensionally sanctified. Then, in response, she is often erased altogether in the

Protestant tradition. One scholar said Mary had been reduced to the furniture Jesus sits on. But now she has her moment. Having been seen and validated by her cousin, she speaks up with the authority and passion of an Old Testament prophet!

**My soul proclaims the greatness of the lord
For he has done great things for me,
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly
He has filled the hungry with good things
And the rich he has sent away empty**

We can see Mary as a young Jewish woman with her own agency, empowered by the listening ear of her cousin to speak with a loud voice, her female relative Elizabeth, who is already able to see God in her.

Remember two weeks ago when Ted asked us to greet each other with the words: I see God in you? We pray that Holy Trinity will be a place that recognizes you for who you are. A place where like Mary you will seek out and find the people who see the light of God in you. And that this will empower you to sing your full story.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Thanks be to God.