

Opening Prayer

Welcome

There is a song in the air – standing if able # 91

Hymn # 94 What Child is This? – offertory

Offering and sharing

Message: The Nurturing and Independent Woman, Mary

We think of Mary, mostly in our own cultures. That is human. And if she was the mother of God and we are made in the image of God, then it is not necessarily wrong to think in this way. That is unless we think anyone else is not made in the image of God, or that Mary could not be of that culture or race. All of us have God within, regardless.

When anyone takes scripture out of context, when we delete the idea of Mary as the strong, young woman, who interacted directly with the angels and was able to raise and nurture a prophetic child on her own, you have the basis of some pretty misogynistic religions. In the Koran of Muslims, "Men are considered above the women, because Allah has given the one part a superiority above the other." Even Confucius is quoted as saying, "One hundred girls are not worth as much as one boy." In Hinduism "A woman must never enjoy her independence." And we know how castigating the Christian Bible can be -- Paul to the Ephesians in the New Testament considered women almost servants to their men who are their masters. But add Mary back, and you have a template for an ideal – an icon -- a strong woman, whose dependence on God and her strong will to persevere helped to change the world and equalize the genders.

Many religions around the world, not just our own, bring in this story of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and yet there is still inequality. Even when her virginity before the birth of Jesus is doubted by people such as Jewish non-Christians, she was seen as a ferociously resistant woman, who led an entire region in a revolt that is still covered in history as one of the best organized rebellions against the Roman armies of the time. And according to that story, she was only 12.

Even with this, in the United States, in Protestant hymnals, she barely makes it into 15% of our Christian Christmas carols, and then, rarely using her name.

Let's all admit it. We all have our Marys in our lives, the women (and men) who are strong, good, and have risen over adversity to give our inner Christ nurturance and love. And we have pushed them to the side as we have in our denominations that prefer not to mention her too much. As we go through this evening's service, I encourage you to think about her attributes, and find those in your life and in the women and men around you, because Mary is known as one woman who was very influential throughout the world. But the best way to be influential is one person at a time, and with gratitude for those who have made your life what it is today.

In the world at large, including Arab countries, but also including Mexico, the USA, Russia, Europe, and Canada, Mary is one of the most honored figures among Muslims. Most view her as the most righteous women to have lived, and a minority view her as an actual female prophet. Muslim women look upon her as an example.

Mary, sometimes called Miriam, was believed to be the mother of Jesus (sometimes called Isa). She is mentioned more in the Quran than in the entire New Testament and is also the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran. Mary plays an important role in Islamic culture and religious tradition, and verses from the Quran relating to Mary are frequently inscribed on the mihrab of various mosques, (the pointed enclaves that

hold doorways and are frequently above and around prayer altars) including in the Hagia Sophia and other mosques around the world. As people kneel to pray, small statues of Mary are at eye level.

The Quran narrates that Mary grew up in the temple of prayer, and had a special place in the temple of her own. She was placed under the care of the prophet Zechariah. When Zechariah entered Mary's prayer chamber, he found her provided with food and he would ask her where she received it from, to which she would reply that God provides to whom He wills. There in her chamber, Gabriel appeared to Mary, who was still young in age, and announced to her the birth of Jesus. After her immediate astonishment at being pregnant even though she was a virgin, she was reassured by the angel's answer that God has the power to do anything.

The Quran's narrative of the birth of Jesus is somewhat different from that in the New Testament. The Quran states that when the pains of childbirth came upon Mary, she held onto a nearby palm tree, at which point a voice came from "beneath the (palm-tree)" or "beneath her," which said, "Grieve not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; "And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee."

The Quran goes on to describe that Mary vowed not to speak to any man on that day, as God was to make Jesus perform his first miracle. The Quran goes on to say that Mary brought Jesus to the temple, where immediately she began to be questioned and put down by all the men, excluding Zechariah, who believed in the virgin birth. The Israelites questioned Mary about how she came to be with child while still unmarried, to which Mary pointed to the baby Jesus. It was then that the infant Jesus began to speak in the cradle, and spoke of his prophecy for the first time.

Finding accurate Talmudic information on Jewish beliefs around Jesus' birth and about his mother is difficult and contradictory for several

reasons. The first and most important is that many of the texts in the Talmud were redacted due to heresy and blasphemy charges by the Vatican and other Christian institutions. The second problem is that Jesus was either seen by the Jewish people early in the history as a very smart sorcerer who led people astray by saying he was the Messiah or a profound prophet who taught Judaism to non-Jewish people.

But one Jewish tale stands out the most when there is a discussion of who Jesus was and where he came from, particularly when talking about Mary, and that is the rape of Mary by the lead soldier when she led the rebellion in Galilee. The Babylonian Talmud refers to Jesus as “Son of Pandera” and Mary as Miriam Stada. Stada sounds like the same word for unfaithful and another which means outcast or turned away. The Talmud says that Tiberius Julius Abdes Panthera was a prominent Roman soldier who was head of the league over Galilee’s region.

Mary was a very strong-willed woman, very independent-minded, and helped to lead a revolt there when she was only 12. She had been promised with payment in marriage to a carpenter. Some later stories, after 3 AD say that Mary and the Panthera were lovers, but earliest texts name him as the father of her child, and many name him as the one who forced himself on her. Some say he was punished for his assault, but that she was still held responsible for committing adultery. She was said to have escaped death of stoning in the community by running to Egypt where she bore and raised Jesus, that is known both as Jeshua Ben Stada and Jeshua Ben Panthera, Jeshua Ben Panthera.

According to legend in the Babylonian Talmud, Yeshua or Jesus was taught magic while in Egypt, and returned to deceive the Israelites who were under Roman rule. In Jewish thought of the time, Jesus Pandera was able to perform many tricks of deception.

But she is a woman thought to have been able to travel, pregnant, by herself, to a foreign country known to have been unkind to Jewish people, and there, raise a child on her own.

Like the Muslim belief, Catholic belief is that Mary, mother of Jesus, was a very righteous woman, and kept from birth from sin or its ramifications. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary conceived without “original sin” preserved by the grace of God.

Unlike Protestants, Catholics believe that Jesus was Mary’s only child and that she remained a lifelong virgin. Joseph, her husband, is thought to have been an elderly widower who already had children and died before Jesus was in ministry.

Queries

- ▶ But what is that we know of this woman who bore this child?
- ▶ What do we know of women our men who help our Inner Christ to be nurtured to maturity?
- ▶ Can we see these women or men as part of who we became?
- ▶ Can we see them in how we learned to love and grow our own spirituality?
- ▶ Can we see parts of ourselves as loving and kind, strong, independent, determined, able to raise others in spiritual maturity?

God is frequently considered a mother in the Bible –

- ▶ In Isaiah 66:13 God is talked about as a comforting mother “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”
- ▶ In Isaiah 49:15 it says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

- ▶ These aspects of God we see in Mary: nurturing, loving, protecting, independent, intelligent, able to overcome adversity.
- ▶ We see these in ourselves as part of God within us – helping us to get through some of the toughest times. We see them in community and in each other. We have within us a God of love and light, that nurtures and preserves, nurses and admonishes, encourages and edifies our every step.

Here now the story of our Mary --- and some songs – then we will go into open worship for a moment – followed by Silent Night.

First Reading:

Luke 1

26 Now in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy,[**i**] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, **27** to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant[**j**] of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **28** The angel[**k**] came to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!"[**l**] **29** Startled by his statement, she tried to figure out what his greeting meant.

30 Then the angel told her, "Stop being afraid, Mary, because you have found favor with God. **31** Listen! You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.**33** He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end."

34 Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen, since I have not had relations with[**m**] a man?"

35 The angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will surround you. Therefore, the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God. **36** And listen! Elizabeth, your

relative, has herself conceived a son in her old age, this woman who was rumored to be barren is in her sixth month. **37** Nothing is impossible with respect to any of God's promises."

38 Then Mary said, "Truly I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you have said happen to me." Then the angel left her.

Song -- Mary Did You Know -- Tracy is Singing

Second Reading:

46 Then Mary said,

"My soul praises the greatness of the Lord!

47 My spirit exults in God, my Savior,

48 because he has looked favorably on his humble servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed,

49 because the Almighty has done great things for me.

His name is holy.

50 His mercy lasts from generation to generation
for those who fear him.

51 He displayed his mighty power with his arm.

He scattered people who were proud in mind and heart.[p]

52 He pulled powerful rulers from their thrones
and lifted up humble people.

53 He filled hungry people with good things
and sent rich people away with nothing.

54 He helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful,

55 according to the promise he made[q] to our ancestors—
to Abraham and his descendants forever."

56 Now Mary stayed with Elizabeth[r] about three months and then went back home.

Tracy will sing -- "The Annunciation"

Third Reading:

Luke 2:

2 Now in those days an order was published by Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** So all the people went to their hometowns to be registered.

4 Joseph, too, went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the City of David (called Bethlehem), because he was a descendant[**a**] of the household and family of David. **5** He went there[**b**] to be registered with Mary, who had been promised to him in marriage and was pregnant.

6 While they were there, the time came for her to have her baby, **7** and she gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a feeding trough, because there was no place for them in the guest quarters.

Hymn # 65 Away in a Manger

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, watching their flock during the night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** Then the angel told them, “Stop being afraid! Listen! I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. **11** Today your Savior, the Lord Messiah,[**c**] was born in the City of David. **12** And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.”

13 Suddenly, a multitude of the Heavenly Angels appeared with the angel, praising God by saying, **14** “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people who enjoy his favor!”

Hymn # 64 Angels We Have Heard on High

15 When the angels had left them and gone back to heaven, the shepherds told one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see what has taken place that the Lord has told us about.” **16** So they went quickly and found Mary and Joseph with the baby, who was lying in the feeding trough. **17** When they saw this, they repeated what they had been told about this child.