

Mary The Mother Of Jesus

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Advent Series: The Family of Jesus

Luke 1:26-38

Most of you are probably familiar with the sculpture that is called The Pieta.

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Rembrandt's The Pieta (Undamaged)

It may be the most famous religious sculpture in the world. Michelangelo carved it when he was 24 years old. It always blows my mind when I hear about one of history's geniuses and what they were able to do at a young age. At age 24, when I was learning how to fry an egg for breakfast, Michelangelo carved the Pieta. Pieta, by the way, is Italian for "pity." And in this statue Michelangelo portrays Mary, the Mother of Jesus, cradling her son's lifeless body on her lap displaying motherly pity for her son.

In 1972 on Pentecost Sunday in June, a man named Laszlo Toth, who was a Hungarian born Australian, leaped over a guardrail at the Vatican and attacked the statue with a hammer. He hit it 15 times.

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Pictures of the damaged Pieta

The hammer blows broke the nose from Mary's exquisite sorrowful face. They gauged her left eyelid, her neck, head and veil. They snapped off her left arm at the elbow and her fingers snapped off as they hit the floor.

For many people around the world, Laszlo Toth's hammer blows to this statue were experienced as being like the assassination of a beloved world leader. I remember as a teenager seeing people cry as they heard the news and saw the defacing of this amazing work of art.

Do you know the attack or defacing of the statue of Mary serves as an incredibly tragic picture of what the Christian church has done to Mary over the past 1800 years. On the one hand, traditional Roman Catholicism has super-exalted Mary. she is called 'The Queen of Heaven' and there are many paintings of her being crowned as being 'The Queen of Heaven' by Jesus and by God the Father.

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Paintings of Mary being crowned The Queen of Heaven

When Marlene and I went to Rome several years ago we visited many churches in which there would be a portrait of God the Father and Jesus and a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit. But in the center of the portrait, there was Mary. It was almost as if in some popular Roman Catholic thought, she became the fourth member of the Trinity. According to traditional Roman Catholicism, Mary spent her life as a perpetual virgin. Even though she was married, she never had marital relations with her husband, Joseph. She never had any children beyond her first-born Jesus.

According to the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, Mary was not only a perpetual virgin, but as an act of special grace from God, she was freed from the taint of original sin. This is the meaning, by the way, of Immaculate Conception. Immaculate Conception in Roman Catholic doctrine does not mean virgin birth. Immaculate Conception means that God by a special act of grace infused into Mary's soul sanctifying grace from the very instant of her conception so that she was freed from the stain of original sin. Therefore, according to this doctrine, Mary was not subject to the laws of bondage to sin, or the devil's work, or even death.

The super-exaltation of Mary includes 17 festival days that are devoted to her, the 50 Hail Mary's that are included in the Rosary. Roman Catholics often call upon Mary as a mediator. She is sometimes considered to be the mediatrix, or mediator between us and the mediator, Jesus. The idea is that we need a mediator with the mediator.

In many medieval paintings, Christ was portrayed as seated upon a rainbow as the stern Judge of all mankind. So in medieval Roman Catholicism it was to Mary that ordinary Christians appealed for pity, comfort, and for help in their hour of need.

Popular Catholicism has associated Mary with special appearances at sites like Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe. To confirm this appearance to Juan Diego at Guadalupe, an image of the Immaculate Conception was imprinted on Juan Diego's mantle. I saw this robe when I went to on a private tour of the Pope's gardens a few years back. The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe was just celebrated this past week on December 12th in Mexico and the Mexican community here in America.

Now, contemporary Roman Catholicism particularly at an official level, and especially as taught by Vatican II has trimmed back on all of the titles given to Mary. In fact, Vatican II did not give a separate article in their final document to Mary, but rather subsumed Mary under the article on the church. So at an official level, there is a trimming back of what is said about Mary.

Mary has not only been given this super-exalted titles, but she has been made the ideal of womanhood, the model of motherhood. Mary has been attacked by

feminists as being weak and passive and submissive. Mary has been used to enlist troops into the Army. I read a sermon by an English pastor preached a sermon in which he spoke about Mary's patriotism and of her self-forgetful love for her country. According to this pastor named Stopford Brooke, he said,

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"This is what we want in England, women who will understand and feel what love of country means and act upon it; who will lose thought of themselves and their finery and their pleasure in a passionate effort to yield the sorrow and to destroy the dishonor, dishonesty, and vice of England; to realize that as mothers, maidens, wives, and sisters, they have but to bid the men of this country to be true, brave, loving, just, honorable, and wise; and they will become so..."

I can't read any more of this. Mary has been turned into a political radical. She is the model of the revolutionary struggle of poor people and poor women against injustice and oppression.

And then, many in the Protestant tradition never think about Mary at all except at Christmas. Many evangelicals don't want to speak about Mary because they are afraid they might be accused of being too Catholic. So we hear very few sermons about Mary. Occasionally, in a Protestant wedding you might hear Ave Maria. But rarely do we find Mary as a subject of evangelical study and meditation. Rarely do we think about Mary when we think about how to form Christians into mature followers of Christ. We place purple robes on Mary; we put a crown on her head and exalt her above every creature on the earth; we make her the perfect lady of untouched virginity and innocence; we criticize her for her passivity and her submissiveness; we make her the ideal mother; we use her as the symbol of radical protest against the status quo, we employ Mary as a supporter of the status quo to recruit troops into the Army.

Like Laszlo Toth's attack on the Pieta, the real Mary has been regularly defaced by the church over the last 1800 years. As one person recently put it, the real Mary needs to be liberated from the liberationists.

This morning I would like to look at a few passages in the New Testament so that together we might rediscover the real Mary. I've called today's talk, Mary the Mother of Jesus. Let's pray.

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Lk 1:26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called² the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

In searching for the real Mary, I think that we won't be far off if we see in Mary a model for the life of faith.

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Mary: A Model Disciple

Mary is intended to be as all of the greats in the Bible are intended to be, an example, a model for what believers in Christ ought to be like. There are ways, of course, that Mary is unique. There are ways in which she is one of a kind. There is, after all, only one woman in the history of the world who ever will be the mother of our Savior. Her name was Mary, the virgin from Nazareth. The job of mother of our Savior has been filled. God's not taking any other applications. She has the unique privilege and status that should accord her appropriate honor and respect.

But she is also typical. She is a model that inspires us and encourages us regarding our own faith journeys.

By the way, I believe that modeling is one of the most neglected aspects of the whole educational process in America today. Prior to the last 100 years in the U.S., students had personal relationships with their teachers. And teachers, parents, relatives, and older adults would serve as models, as examples, of the way to do life – how to work hard, how to have manners, how to handle your money; how to deal with temptation; how to pray; how to forgive; how to communicate in marriage. Much of life cannot be learned by reading a book, or sitting in a classroom. Much of life can be learned only by seeing a principle lived out in front of us in flesh and blood.

We have organized our Marriage and Family ministry around this principle of modeling. When a couple here wants to get married here at the church, we don't just put that young couple through a series of classes, or simply give them a book to read. We pair the couple up with a more experienced couple, who can

serve as models and mentors for resolving conflict, or growing in intimacy. It's an incredibly helpful approach, and one that I would encourage any of you who are planning to be married, to take advantage of.

It is this issue of models and mentors that everyone in America says is needed for young people, especially for young people growing up in our cities. Friends, God may be stirring you about mentoring a young man or a young woman. A good starting point for you might be to contact our after school program director, Kevin Brown, or contact our community center director, Will Shearer, and say, "Is there a young man or young woman, a boy or girl, that I can tutor? Someone I can help to teach to read, or to pass their state exams?" In the course of doing that, you build a relationship with that boy or girl and maybe make a difference in their life for the next 70 years.

What is Mary a model of? We read these words in Luke 1.26-28, where it says in v. 28,

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Lk 1:26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

The old Latin translation put it,

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Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Some translations even added a phrase,

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Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women and the Lord is with you.

What is Mary a model of?

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Mary: A Model Receiver Of God's Grace.

Over and over again, the word grace is used in this passage. In v. 28, where we read:

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Lk 1:28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Or in some of the old translations, the word “Hail.” The word literally is the Greek word:

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Chaire from the Greek Word “charis” = grace

Which comes from the word charis, the word that we use for grace. So the first thing that the angel says to Mary is, “Grace.” And then in v. 28, the passage goes on to say,

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Lk 1:28 The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

The Greek word here is:

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Kecharitomena from the Greek work “charis” = grace

This is also a derivative of the word “grace.” And then in v. 30,

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Lk 1:30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.”

That is the Greek word:

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Charin from the Greek word “charis” = grace

That also means grace. In other words, the angel came to Mary and said to her, “Grace, grace, grace.” Mary is a model receiver of God’s grace.

How should we understand the grace shown to Mary? There are two different ways that this grace has been understood. One that God somehow found in Mary an attractiveness, a goodness, a purity that he was able to bless. Or, two, that there was nothing in Mary that called forth the grace of God. God out of his own love chose this young, poor woman to be the mother of the Savior of the world.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, distinguishes between two types of love: human and divine. He says this:

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The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

In other words, human love is drawn forth by the object of the love. We see something in the object of the love, something beautiful, something attractive, and we say, "I love that person." I love them because and then you fill in the blank. I love them because they are great listeners. I love them because they are sensitive to me. I love them because they love God. I love them because they are pretty, they're handsome, they're kind, and they treat me well.

Human love is elicited by the object of the love.

Divine love is totally different. Divine love is not elicited by the object of love. Divine love simply is. As a theologian named Miroslav Volf said in a wonderful book titled *Free of Charge*,

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Divine love doesn't depend on the truth, beauty, or goodness of the beloved. Because God's love isn't caused by its object, it can love those who are not loveable, sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong.

Martin Luther said,

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Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.

What this means, in other words, is that God does not look around for a person who is worthy and says, "Ah, finally, finally, after scouring the earth, I've discovered a person I can use." God bestows worthiness on us. God gives worth to the unworthy. God says, "I have decided to show you grace, (you can fill in your name), because I am gracious."

Mary is a model of grace received, not grace deserved. Mary is not a grace dispenser. She is a grace receiver. Mary is not a fountain of grace; Mary is an empty vessel into which God poured his grace. Mary was not shown grace as a reward for her goodness; Mary was shown grace as a gift to magnify the love of God. The hero of the story is not Mary; it is Jesus.

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Lk 1:31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will

give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

It's not you will be great; but, he will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be given the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end.

We find the real Mary not by crowning her the Queen of Heaven, but by crowning Jesus King of Heaven. He is seated on a throne that he doesn't share with anyone.

And we honor Mary when we call her a servant of King Jesus. Mary is the setting of the ring; Jesus is the diamond. Mary is the frame; the painting is of Christ. Mary is the moon reflecting the light; but Jesus is the sun giving the light. Mary understood herself not as a dispenser of grace, but a giver of a grace when she said in vv. 48-49, these words:

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Lk 1:48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

And even Mary's faith must not be turned into a work. When her cousin Elizabeth said in v. 45,

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Lk 1:45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

We should not turn Mary's faith into some type of meritorious work. Faith is not a gift that we give to God. It is not a work of merit before God. The apostle Paul is clear about this in Romans 4:5,

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Ro 4:5 However, to anyone who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

Faith is the empty hands that we sinners hold open asking God to fill them. Faith says, “God, you alone are the giver and we are always the receiver. You are the fountain; and we are the empty cups. You are the vine; we are the branches. Apart from you, we can do nothing.” Faith honors God by attributing every good thing in our lives to God. That's what Mary models for us – the honoring of God. Look at vv. 46-49,

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Lk 1:46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God

my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

I am blessed not because I merit it. I am blessed because God has done great things for me. Can you say that about yourself? I am a blessed woman; I am a blessed man; I am a blessed child because God has done great things for me.

See, brothers and sisters, the church has historically taken the Bible and turned its message on its head. The Bible, friends, is not a story of heroic men and women standing on their tippy-toes and reaching up to God. The Bible is a story of God in his grace stooping low and reaching down to men and women in need. The Bible is not a story of how, through various religious disciplines, you can climb a ladder up to God. The Bible is a story of how God in his great love came down from heaven and became man. And having become man, he humbled himself and became a servant of men and women. And then he went even lower. Having become a servant, he allowed himself to be crucified naked on a cross to pay for your sins and my sins.

In the Bible we always find in men and women not stories of meritorious earning, but stories of unmerited forgiveness.

So what does this mean for you and me? It speaks to us friends about the foundation of our usefulness before God. The reason why you can be used by God, the reason why I can be used by God as a channel of God's favor in the world, is not because I have achieved something, or because you have achieved something. It is because God is gracious. God desires to show grace to you. Turn to your neighbor and say, "God desires to show grace to you."

Let me apply this a little bit. Some of you are sitting around not serving, not giving your lives away to the kingdom of God because you say to yourself, "Who am I to be used by God?" In my experience as a pastor over the last few decades, there is no more common excuse other than busy-ness that people give for why they are not serving and why they are not giving to the kingdom of God more often used than "I don't feel worthy. I don't feel adequate. I'm a new Christian. I hardly know any of the Bible. I've got such and such an issue in my life. I've got relational problems. I've got sin problems. I've got financial problems."

My response is, "If you are a new Christian, give yourself to serve God's kingdom and God will grow you. If you feel unworthy, give yourself to God and God will bestow worth on you. If you don't know the Bible, go to what we call Foundations here at the church, its for folks who are just beginners - join a small group, study your Bible, learn it." By the way, one of the best ways to learn the Bible is to teach it to kids. As you read the children's lessons that we give you, as you read and study the verses, as you pray for kids in children's ministry, you will grow.

You can go to the children's ministry desk and say, "Hey, I would like to help out in children's ministry." But don't wait until you've grown to a certain point to give yourself in service to the kingdom of God.

You don't need x-amount of knowledge to serve the Lord. You may need a certain amount of knowledge or maturity to lead a group, but you can serve the Lord now, as you are. Give to the Lord now what you have and God will grow you. You've got a sin problem? Repent! Break off from rebelling against God, then go serve the Lord and he will grow you.

You've got a personal problem? You've got a financial problem? Go to one of our counselors. Go to a Crown Financial Group and work on your financial issues. Master your problems, but don't wait until you are debt free or problem free to serve, or to give financially. God will grow you as you serve. God will grow you as you give.

My goodness, every leader in this church was once a new Christian. Every leader in this church at one time didn't know the Bible. Every leader has in the past and currently in the present have problems and issues. The one thing the leaders in this church discovered was that we could serve the Lord even as God was growing us. Someone invited us to serve not because we were worthy. God gives the worth. Not because we deserved it; God gives the merit.

And I'm here as pastor today saying to you that I am inviting you to serve in this church. I am inviting you to give to this church. God will grow you as you serve. God will grow you as you give. Find a place in this church to serve and give your life away. It is not because we are such great people, men and women of conquering faith, but because we open our hands to God as beggars and we say, "God fill us."

Mary was also a responder to God's will.

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Mary: A Model Responder to God's Will

SLIDE – Luke 1.38

Lk 1:38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

In some translations of Luke 1.38 Mary's words are recorded as:

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Let it be to me according to your word.

Back in 1969 Paul McCartney from the Beatles wrote a song titled, "Let It Be." Those of you who are my age probably know the words:

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When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Let it be, let it be.
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

And when the broken hearted people
Living in the world agree,
There will be an answer, let it be.
For though they may be parted there is
Still a chance that they will see
There will be an answer, let it be.

Let it be, let it be. Yeah
There will be an answer, let it be.

And when the night is cloudy,
There is still a light that shines on me,
Shine on until tomorrow, let it be.

I wake up to the sound of music
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Let it be, let it be.
There will be an answer, let it be.
Let it be, let it be,
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

Now, there is controversy over the meaning of Paul McCartney's words. Paul said he wrote it as a tribute to his mother, Mary, who died when he was 14. But John Lennon always criticized the song and said, "It's no doubt that Mother Mary was an allusion to Christianity to which he strongly objected." I think Paul McCartney may have unconsciously prophesied. You know, God can speak through non-believers. And he often does speak through non-believing musicians and songwriters.

God speaks not just through his people; God speaks through artists, filmmakers, co-workers, and non-Christian family members. Some of my most powerful

experiences of the voice of God have been through watching films like “Life is Beautiful” and “Schindler’s List.”

Listen to these words again:

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When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Let it be, let it be.
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

There is a spiritual discipline that has been known in the church over the last thousand years. It is called the discipline of submission. Here is how Richard Foster, in his wonderful book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, defines the discipline of submission:

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It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it.

Almost all church fights and splits occur because people do not have the freedom to give in to each other. We insist that a critical issue is at stake; we are fighting for a sacred principle. Perhaps this is the case. Usually it’s not. Often we cannot stand to give in because it means that we will not get our own way.

Do you see that friends, in your arguments and fights with other people – that often you will dig in and defend a ridiculous point, a point that you don’t even believe even while you are arguing fervently for it, because you cannot stand the thought of giving into this other person.

A monk told a story about a time a visitor came to the monastery looking for the purpose and meaning of life. This monk said to the visitor, “If what you seek is truth, there is one thing you must have in your life above everything else.” The visitor said, “I know what it is – to find the truth, I have to have an overwhelming passion for the truth.” The monk said, “No. In order to find the truth, you must have the willingness to admit that you may be wrong.”

Are you able to do that? Are you good at doing that – admitting that you may be wrong? I'm not good at that.

Mary is a model of laying down the terrible burden of always having to get our own way. She says, "Let it be. I didn't choose this path for my life. But since you did, Lord, let it be." Mary's "let it be to me according to your will," is the same as Jesus' statement in the Garden,

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"Not my will, but yours be done."

Do you know, friends that your happiness and my happiness does not depend on getting what we want out of life. One of the best kept secrets to happiness is this: You can be happy even if life doesn't go according to your plans. You can be happy even if life doesn't go according to your formula. You can be happy even if you don't get your own way. Mary discovered the secret to happiness: Let it be to me, Lord, according to your will.

Mary's "let it be" is totally counter-cultural to the spirit of American individualism and self-assertion. We believe the secret to happiness is found in us having the freedom to run our own lives having no one telling us what to do, calling our own shots, determining our own destinies. This stuff is as American as apple pie.

Of course, none of us are nearly as free as we think we are. We are all limited by something. We are all controlled by something. Like the old Bob Dylan song lyrics:

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You gotta serve somebody;
It may be the devil,
Or it may be the Lord,
You gotta serve somebody.

If you choose that "I'm not going to be controlled by God or his will," I guarantee you, friend, that you are still controlled by somebody other than yourself. You are controlled by what other people think of you. You may be controlled by what a few fashion designers in New York say you ought to wear. You may be controlled by your own addictions and habits that go beyond your strength to break.

A Christian is someone who has discovered the secret to happiness – repeated by making a decision that you are going to have God's will and God's way control you. And there is so much freedom, and so much peace when you finally say along with Mary, "Let it be to me, Lord, according to your will." I have continually found this to be true in my own life over the last 33 years. Whenever I stop insisting on my own way, whenever I make a decision in little things or big things:

“God, I’m going to choose to do your will in this situation; I’m going to let you have your way in my life,” I find myself to be freer, I feel lighter, I feel more peace inside, I feel more whole, I feel more hopeful. Let it be to me, Lord, according to your will.

Submission is not dumb resignation to the fates. Ah, well, this is the way my life turned out – que sera sera – what will be with be. Biblical submission comes after wrestling with God. Biblical submission comes after questioning God. Biblical submission comes after sweating and searching and praying until you discover the will of God. It is totally appropriate to pray, wrestle, and argue with God about an issue in your life, or the way your life is turning out. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane he repeatedly asked that the cup of God’s wrath be removed from him. If there is any other way, Lord, to achieve the salvation of human beings, then take this cup from me. If there is any other way other than the way of the cross, Lord, then please allow me to go that way.

It was after wrestling with God that Jesus submitted to the will of the Father. And it was after questioning the angel of the Lord – Mary’s “How will this be?” in v.34,

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Lk 1:34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

Her question wasn’t just a biological question. It certainly wasn’t a gynecological question. It was a theological question. It was a personal question. It was “my life is hanging by my fingernails” kind of question. Is this really the direction you have for my life, that my life should be permanently marked by scandal and shame, the shame of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Is this really what you intend for my life, God? That I will always go around with a Scarlet A on my chest and the suspicion that I’ve been immoral.

It was after wrestling and praying that Mary said, “Let it be.”

So, to what should we say “let it be, Lord, according to your will?” We should say “let it be” to the call of God on our lives. Another way to put this is Mary said, “yes” to the will of God. There comes a point, friend, when you stop saying “no” to God about a dating relationship that God wants you to end, when you stop saying “no” to God about your sexual practices; when you stop saying no to God in the area of your finances; when you stop saying no to God in the way you are relating in your marriage or to your kids; and you start saying yes to the Lord. There comes a point when you stop saying no to God about the big call of God on your life – to the service of his kingdom; to sacrifice on behalf of the lost or poor. Let it be means because you say so, Lord, I will.

And it is not just that we submit to the call of God on our lives, “let it be” is a statement that we make regarding the circumstances of our lives. It is not always easy to determine when we need to submit to the circumstances of our lives.

Should we stay home with our children, or send them to daycare so that we can go to school and pursue a professional degree? Should we submit to difficult circumstances at our job, or should we pursue another job? Should we submit to painful interactions with our extended family, or should we confront those things? Sometimes God wants us to stand up and challenge things. Sometimes he wants us to draw a firm boundary line. Sometimes he wants us to say “enough is enough.” But sometimes he calls us to submit, to give up, to yield to the hand we have been dealt.

It is not an easy thing; there is no formula regarding how the Holy Spirit might lead us to handle the circumstances of our lives. But there does come a point when this statement “let it be to me according to your will” may be said to you regarding your life circumstances. There is ancient wisdom found in the serenity prayer that many people have found to be a key step in their healing from addictions and a key step in their healing from always having to get their own way. Some of you who have been in A.A. know this prayer:

SLIDE – the Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom always to know the difference.

For some of us, it means I will stop being bitter and complaining about my family life. I will stop being bitter and complaining and torn up inside about my finances. I will stop being bitter and complaining about issues of health in my life. Let it be to me according to your will.

And finally,

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Mary: A Model Reflector Of God’s Joy and Pain

You know, every birth is an occasion of pain and pleasure. The pain of childbirth, the joy of having a child. And every Christmas is also a mix of joy and sorrow – the joy of celebrating the birth of our Lord; the joy of gathering with family; the pain of loneliness or unfulfilled expectations. What we see in Mary is a model of reflecting the joy and suffering of Christ.

Mary speaks about her joy in Luke 1.46-47,

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Lk 1:46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

But there is also suffering in the announcement. As I said before, when Mary said in v. 34,

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Lk 1:34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

She is not only asking a biological question, she is asking a theological question. She is asking a personal question. She realizes that this birth of the child is not just going to bring joy, but it is going to create a scandal that will follow Mary and follow her son for the rest of their lives.

We find joy and suffering in ch. 2. The setting is that Mary and Joseph went to the temple to make their offering in accordance with the Old Testament law. An old man who was a prophet came up to them and we read in vv. 34-35 these words:

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Lk 2:34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

You can circle the word "too" in your Bible. What Simeon is saying is, "Mary, you are going to share in the pain of your son's suffering." Mothers, this comes as no surprise to you, does it? Any threat to your child comes as a threat to you. Any pain suffered by your child is experienced as pain to you. It is impossible to give birth to a child and not share in your child's sufferings.

See, it wasn't only Jesus' life, but Mary's life that was lived in the shadow of the cross. The gospel of John has only two references to Mary, both of them concern the cross. In John 2, Jesus and his mother, Mary, are attending a wedding at Cana for a young couple. The couple runs out of wine. Mary speaks to her son, Jesus, and says:

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They have no more wine.

Jesus responds in John 2.4 and says:

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Jn 2:4 "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

Readers of the gospel of John understand that when Jesus speaks about his hour, he is talking about the time of his death. Both Jesus and Mary always lived with a conscious sense that Jesus' life would be cut short by violence against

him. From the time Jesus was a baby, Mary was told, "You are going to share in your son's suffering."

And the other point that Mary appears in the gospel of John is at the cross. John 19:25-27,

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Jn 19:25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Mary is a reflector of the joy and suffering of her son, Jesus.

VIDEO – The Passion of the Christ

There is a wonderful poem from the Middle Ages titled "Stabat Mater Dolorosa" which translated means "The Sorrowful Mother Was Standing." This poem was set to music by some of the greatest composers in history. It was set to music by Haydn and Vivaldi and Verdi. And this hymn from the Middle Ages was among the most popular Roman Catholic hymns for 600 years. I want to read to you a few verses translated into English:

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At the Cross her station keeping,
Stood the mournful Mother weeping,
Close to Jesus to the last.

Through her heart, his sorrow sharing,
All his bitter anguish bearing,
Now at last the sword has past.

O how sad and sore distress
Was that Mother, highly blest,
Of the sole-One.

Christ above in torment hangs,
She beneath beholds the pangs
Of her dying glorious Son.

Is there one who would not weep,
Whelmed in miseries so deep,
Christ's dear Mother to be hold?

Can the human heart refrain

From partaking in her pain,
In that mother's pain untold?

And then it goes on to say:

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Let me share with thee his pain,
Who for all my sins was slain,
Who for me in torment died.

Let me mingle tears with thee,
Mourning him who mourned for me,
All the days that I may live:
By the cross with thee to stay,
There with thee to weep and pray,
Is all I ask of thee to give.

Let me to my latest breath,
In my body bear the death,
Of that dying Son of thine.
When my body dies,
Let my soul be granted
The glory of paradise. Amen

Joy and suffering are modeled in the life of Mary. And joy and suffering, pain and pleasure, are the two rails that the train that is our lives rides on. Both joy and suffering, pain and pleasure, can be occasions for temptation and for turning away from God. Jesus tells us in his parable of the four soils about his Word falling on rocky soil. He says in Mark 4.16-17 these words:

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Mk 4:16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

In other words, pain is often the reason people turn away from God. I can't handle what you are allowing to come to my life, Lord. I can't continue to trust you if you treat me this way. Pain is often the reason people turn away from God.

And so is pleasure. Jesus speaks about seeds sown among thorns and says this in Mark 4.18-19

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Mk 4:18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries

of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

For Jesus, people face greater temptations to turn away from him because of pleasure than because of pain. Often in pain people turn to Jesus. In pleasure and prosperity people often declare their independence of Jesus. I don't need you now, God. I'm doing well on my own. Certainly, some of you have seen this in your own lives, haven't you? I don't need to pray. I don't need fellowship. I don't need to read God's Word. I don't need to lean into God. I certainly don't need to fast when things are going well. I can just assume God's blessing in my life.

Pain and pleasure are occasions of temptation. And joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure can be opportunities for growth and for turning to the Lord.

Let me close with this statement. The great Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn talked about what it was like to be sentenced to a prison camp under Joseph Stalin in his prize-winning books called "The Gulag Archipelago". Here is what Solzhenitsyn wrote:

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It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts...That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: "Bless you, prison!" I...have served enough time there. I nourish my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!"

We do not say about a difficulty in our life, "bless you – bless you, evil; bless you, abuse; bless you, injustice; But Christians can say, bless you that you became an occasion for me to turn to God. Bless you because I've found that God is sufficient even for this. Bless you that I have discovered that God can overcome even this. Bless you that God could work even through this horror. Bless you that even through this, I can still discover God's goodness and God's healing and God's love. Bless you that this pain is not all there is. I see more clearly how much I have been made for eternity. Not only joy, but also pain, can be an occasion for our spiritual growth. Mary discovered this. Her suffering became the occasion for her to become a model for our lives.

The church has marred the face of Mary. But as we meditate upon her; as we think of Mary and study her life, we find in her a model for our own journey of faith. Let's pray.

Mary The Mother Of Jesus

Rich Nathan

December 16-17, 2006

Advent Series: The Family of Jesus

Luke 1:26-38

I. Mary: The Defacing Of Her Image

II. Mary: A Model Disciple

III. Mary: A Receiver Of God's Grace (Lk. 1.26-30)

**IV. Mary: A Model Responder To God's Will
(Lk. 1.38)**

**V. Mary: A Model Reflector Of God's Joy And Pain
(Lk. 2.35)**