

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 15, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:7-11; Psalm 45:10-15;
Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Heard an interesting comment from a relative of mine while we discussed the cruise my extended family took in early July. This relative noted that this past week two hurricanes were bearing down upon the Caribbean and portions of Florida, such as Key West, where we had cruised. He then said, "God really blessed you with good weather for your week's vacation."

I have trouble with those kinds of remarks. While I thank God for a refreshing vacation, smooth sailing and untroubled waters, I wish to be careful with my words. Every Sunday afternoon another Royal Caribbean ocean liner leaves Baltimore, heading south to the Bahamas and Florida. Surely my relative wasn't implying that God blessed me in July while ignoring countless other vacationers who happened to choose a cruise in August—but that's what it sounded like.

I understood what my relative was trying to say, but human language is terribly imprecise and inadequate for describing the activity of God. Add to that our human tendency to look at life and evaluate it based on how it affects us personally, and you have a recipe for making theological statements which, well, aren't very theological. Whether it's an athlete in the end zone who claims God gave him the victory, or the survivor of a horrendous accident who says, "I was a goner, but I figure God was with me," we end up with grateful people, yes, but we also end up with the obvious question of where was God for the other team, the ones who didn't survive. When the only connection we make with God is what he's done for us as individuals, we forget to talk about the very real and continued activity of God in the world for all his children and all his creation.

I remember reading of a successful young Christian woman who was a member of a congregation familiar with personal testimony in worship—that is, where individuals describe how the Lord God has worked in their lives to give inspiration and hope for others. Personal testimony can be a wonderful way to witness, unless it gives the wrong idea about who God is and what he does. This particular woman told the hushed congregation that she had a career miracle. After college she specifically prayed for a "good-paying job with a big-name company . . ." She promptly landed a marketing job at a Monsanto Company plant. Pretty good. Those kinds of things may happen, though I'm sure there are just as many times when someone's prayed for a good-paying job with a big-name company and it doesn't happen. She had more miracles. She admitted God ignored her plea to find her a great deal on a Honda Accord with payments under such-and-such amount per month. Instead, she says, God seemed to be directing her to a less-expensive slightly-used Ford Escort. Yet, she's not lost her

faith. She said, “I really believe my next car will be a Honda Accord.” But is it wise to base faith solely on what God has done, in particular, and specifically, for me and for me alone? Is it an effective way to witness? Does it even begin to bring the good news to people who may not have had such an experience?

Consider the witness of Mary, mother of our Lord. She begins this way: “My soul magnifies the Lord; and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me . . .”

If we stopped right there, it would seem as if Mary’s only concern, her only reason to give thanks, is because God has chosen her to bear the Messiah. Don’t get me wrong—that is wonderful enough reason to praise God. She **was** chosen for a key role in both the incarnation and in the raising of God’s Son to adulthood. But if that were where Mary ended her testimony—“Listen to me! I’ve been blessed!”—she wouldn’t be all that different from the woman who testifies God got her a great-paying job, and, just possibly, a neat car next time around.

There is so much more to this song. First, the word she uses—“My soul **magnifies** . . .”—is critical here. Mary doesn’t proclaim her own greatness. Quite the contrary. She speaks of her lowliness, her humble station in life. She praises **God**, and proclaims that **he** is great because he shows favor to her, in spite of her lowliness, by choosing her to bear his Son. This song is less “Look at me! Look at me!” and more “Look at God!”

As well, this song does not revolve solely around **Mary’s** good fortune. Mary’s good fortune turns out to be **creation’s** good fortune. Mary is indeed chosen by God, but she is also an instrument in his saving plan, a plan to save the world, all peoples. Jesus is not just Mary’s baby, born in Bethlehem. He’s our Lord. He’s not some private possession Mary will keep for herself, her own personal Messiah. He’s our Messiah, too. And Mary knows that, and sings with joyful abandon. With eyes of faith, as the first disciple of our Lord, she is given the marvelous capacity to see beyond herself. She recognizes that she is a part of something much, much bigger.

The Almighty has done great things for Mary, but she goes on to say more about the Holy One: He shows mercy to those who believe on him in **every** generation. In other words, his favor extends beyond Mary herself. She is not the only lowly person to receive God’s blessings. Mary’s words here are revolutionary. I read that there was a time not long ago when the reading of the Magnificat was not permitted in churches in Guatemala, so radical were the words. Look what she sings! The hungry and those who have been oppressed and those in the lowest stations of life will experience a reversal of fortunes. So, too, their opposite counterparts—God will execute justice on those whose only concern is themselves. These reversals occur because, as we learn from the Old Testament lesson, from the prophet Isaiah: “I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense.” So Mary’s words connect us back to the very God Isaiah prophesied. She sings, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy . . .” Mary sees that with the birth of the

Messiah, God Almighty has remembered the promises he made to his people long before, when he established a covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, with David, and through his prophets, and he intends to **keep** those promises. But she doesn't just look back. She looks to the future. As God chooses a poor peasant girl to carry his Son, as he shows favor to her in spite of her lowliness, so God shows favor to you and me, in spite of who we are, where we've been, what we've done. He chooses to forgive us, then work his purposes in us and through us, and that is simply another amazing reversal. The incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of Mary, who shares our human nature, is the One who fulfills those purposes by drawing us into the family of God, making each of us beloved sons and daughters of the Father. The incarnation of Jesus Christ in Mary's womb is God acting decisively in the lives of every single human being. Whether we realize it or not. Mary just wants us to realize it. So Mary sings not about her own blessings, but the blessings bestowed on all of God's children. This is not private praise for a personal event, but a loud proclamation of a public reason to rejoice. That's the way to witness. That's the way to give testimony. That's good news. God's not just out to change Mary's life, he's out to change our lives. He's out to change the world. And he continues to find ways to do that.

In Wednesday's Patriot-News, there was an article about a young man from the West Shore named Chris Spahr. He's 25, white, and pursuing a master's degree. But he volunteers in Allison Hill in Harrisburg, working with community groups trying to revitalize their neighborhoods. Before his work in Allison Hill, he spent a year in Kenya, helping street children. Spahr understands his own life has been filled with God's blessings—a loving family, a nurturing church, educational opportunities. He wants to share those blessings with the lowliest, the most needy. In his own unique way, Spahr is singing Mary's song. His deeds of compassion, prompted by Spirit of Christ, are testimony to the gracious God above us all.

There's a wonderful cycle here. Mary sings, and we hear her testimony, and it works faith in us, and we end up singing her song as the church on earth. Then we become the visible sign of God's incarnation in this day and age. We become instruments of his will. We offer testimony with our lives. And in so doing, we invite others to experience God's blessings and join in the song. AMEN.

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