

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
The Reverend Richard Englund

Sunday, August 16, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Back many years ago when I began my ministry, most of the mainline churches began to make many changes in their liturgy. Latin was dropped as the language of the Roman Catholic mass. Altars were moved out from the walls so as to resemble a table around which the whole family of God could gather. Churches adopted a three-year common lectionary cycle, so you could go into almost any church today and hear the same lessons being read. And the list could go on and on and on. One change which we have noticed is an increased number of special days in the church year. Today we are celebrating the festival day set aside to honor Mary, the mother of our Lord. Now I'm sure this raises the hackles in the hearts and minds of some Lutherans today – it's too "Catholic" they say. I wish we could get past the hang-up of labeling things as "Protestant" or "Catholic". If it's biblical and if it's good, and if it speaks to our Christian faith, then why not use it? We are so afraid of being labeled that we sometimes lose things which are good.

This had certainly happened with the position of Mary in the Protestant churches. We were so afraid of being accused of worshiping Mary that we wanted absolutely nothing to do with her, except to let her sit by a crèche on Christmas Eve. To have nothing to do with her is as bad as worshiping her, and I'm happy that the recent revisions of our church calendar have set aside a day when we can honor Mary, the mother of our Lord, and that day is always August 15 and this year it happens to fall on a Sunday – today. And so our lessons refer to this very important person in the life of our Lord. Certainly she is as important as Paul and Peter and Matthew and John and James the Elder, whom we honored three weeks ago, and all of the other apostles. We honor those people, and we should do the same for Mary, the mother of our Lord. And yet, at the same time, remembering that we honor her, not worship her. The text for the day is that beautiful Magnificat, the song of Mary as recorded in Luke's gospel. It's a song ascribed to her after she learned she was to bear the Christ-child.

Have you ever really thought, seriously thought, about the birth of our Lord? And I don't mean just in terms of a little baby being born. I mean in terms of the Creator becoming a part of the creation. The God who is infinite becoming finite. The God who is all powerful becoming a helpless infant. The God who is eternal being bound in time. Just to even think about it blows the mind!

A number of years ago our church produced a film entitled *The Antkeeper*. The movie opened with a colony of red ants invading a colony of black ants. As the battle was raging, it was being observed from the top of a hill by a farmer and his son. Without any words being spoken, it soon became apparent that the only way to save the ants was for something dramatic to happen. The father points down to the valley and the son begins his journey down through the bushes and the briar patches, and the scene fades out. As the scene fades back again, we see one solitary ant egg. The son had become an ant to save the ants of the world. We are confronted with a question: Would we be willing to become an ant to save all the ants of the world?

When Christ came to earth as a human being, the Creator became a part of His creation; the infinite became finite; the all powerful became a helpless baby; the eternal became bound in time. Just to even think about it really blows the mind.

I've said very often during my ministry that I believe the incarnation of God becoming a human being is much more difficult to understand or comprehend than is the resurrection. When St. Paul thought about it, all he could say was Christ Jesus who, though he was in form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. I certainly cannot improve on what St. Paul said when he stated that God "emptied" himself to take on human form. And then to be born of Mary? Certainly God could have found someone more important in the royal palace of Jerusalem, finding a princess who had been given all the advantages of wealth and education and culture and position. Or he could have gone to the home of the High Priest, and there had all the advantages of the religious heritage of the people by going to the daughter of the High Priest. But no, God instructs his messenger Gabriel to keep looking, until he had finally come to the humble little town of Nazareth.

"Even in her own town", writes Luther, "she was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house."

Isn't it really beyond understanding that God would do things this way? He picks a poor peasant girl to be the mother of his Son, and then he allows his Son to die like a criminal on a cross. If we were in charge of things, we surely wouldn't do it quite that way, would we? We'd probably make a spectacle out of it like some Cecil B. deMille or Mel Gibson production. But I am thankful that God doesn't do things that way, the way that we would probably do them, because that is not the way that love works. Real love doesn't try to sweep us off our feet. Real love doesn't try to amaze us with the spectacular. The miracle of God's love, the miracle of God's unmerited, unconditional love, the miracle of God's grace, is not to be seen in the mighty and the spectacular, but rather in the common and the lowly. Here in a poor peasant girl, a miracle of grace is allowed to happen, and the world is given a savior. We join with Mary in singing her great hymn of praise:

"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, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

We are a blessed people, too, just like Mary was blessed, because god has done great things for us also. God's work did not end back there 2000 years ago. The miracle of grace is still being performed for you and for me, and God comes to us in those things simple and ordinary.

Take a look at baptism for a moment. Here God takes a few drops of water, a common, lowly, every day liquid, and by use of this water God makes us His children. Seems kind of ridiculous, doesn't it? We certainly wouldn't do things that way, would we? We'd think of something more suitable than just a few drops of water to make us children of God.

Do you remember the story of Naaman in the Old Testament, the story of the leper who was cured by Elisha, the prophet of God? When Elisha told him to go down and wash in the river Jordan, Naaman was angry and said, "I thought he would come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper." Naaman, reacting like you and I, wanted something spectacular. He had trouble accepting the miracle of grace whereby God worked through that which is common and ordinary, through that insignificant little Jordan River, and he almost missed the miracle. So it is with many people today who have trouble accepting the idea that God can make us his children through a few drops of water in baptism.

And then we have the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Here God comes to us by means of a little piece of bread and a few drops of wine. Again the common and the ordinary. And this seems ridiculous, too, to come here and receive this little bit of food, hardly a mouthful, looks completely foolish on the surface. To an outsider this would be something to laugh at. To others who cannot conceive of God coming to us in such common, ordinary things, this is the height of foolishness.

And then we have the story of Mary today, reminding us that God comes to us where we are, in the common, ordinary happenings of everyday life. In the birth of a baby, born to a common, lowly, everyday peasant girl. In death, the death of His Son on a criminal's cross. In a few drops of water, the water we use for everyday washing and bathing and drinking. In a small piece of bread and a few drops of wine, the food that we need to keep life going. God comes in the common, the ordinary, the lowly, the everyday, and works a miracle of grace.

It's hard to believe, isn't it? But then we are reminded of what God says to us: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." To be sure, we do have trouble in understanding and accepting the ways in which God works his miracles of grace. But let us not be so proud that we thereby reject God in the process, for as May has said to us in this great song of praise, God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts".

I am happy the church has once again seen fit to honor Mary, the mother of our Lord. Her simple, trusting, child-like faith is something which we all could copy. And Mary has shown us how to accept God through that which is common, that which is lowly, that which is everyday. And as she raised here voice in a song of praise and joy at the coming of God to her, so can we do as God comes to us, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing."

Amen.