

Sermon December 11, 2011
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Sisters and brothers: There are two persons whose names are spoken each day by tens of millions of people. One of them is Pontius Pilate. The other is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Both names are included in the Creeds of the Church used at every Eucharist each day around the globe.

Pontius Pilate would likely be glad for some greater obscurity. Alas. Incidents of justice denied often follow the perpetrator to the grave and beyond.

The Blessed Virgin Mary may rejoice that she is remembered so often and so lovingly by Jesus' followers. She was named "Blessed among women ...". Indeed, she was and is. She was the instrument through whom God touched the world and each of our lives with the birth of the Child Jesus.

Martin Luther celebrated her and her faithfulness on many occasions – especially in his Sermon on the Magnificat. He writes, "... the holy Mother says, 'My soul doth magnify

God” – it is as if she said her whole life and being, mind and strength, esteem God highly. She is caught up unto God and feels herself lifted up into God’s good and gracious will....”

(M. Luther, Sermon on the Magnificat) The Blessed Virgin was an example of discipleship for Luther.

Subsequent Lutherans were far less kind. Mary was often regarded as a spiritual liability. Like Grinches at Christmas Lutherans need to get better.

Consider Mary’s ministry.

For reasons kept in the heart and mind of God Mary was chosen to be the Mater Dei – the Mother of God. And what a choice she was.

Some think she was very young – perhaps no more than a teenager. But, whatever her age she was formidable when God’s right hand angel, Gabriel, came to her.

Gabriel said to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” That is often easier said than done when an angel stops by to visit. What’s

amazing is the text makes no mention that Mary was frightened. She is some lady.

After Gabriel made the speech about God's intentions Mary asked a question. She wanted to know how such a thing could happen in her life – she was not married, though she was engaged to a man named Joseph.

Gabriel responds by telling Mary that this pregnancy will be a thing of God. People are inclined to lose focus on that overwhelming fact and wander around in territory where there has been a great deal of heat and very little light.

Folks fight about the virgin birth of Jesus. On one side are those who make the case by claiming the authority of the Bible, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” (Those folks often ignore what the Bible says about tithing, but that is another story.) People on the other side who are less inclined to take the Bible literally find themselves shaking their heads at such an idea.

Whatever the truth of it all, the important thing to remember is that the Church, from its infancy to its fuller maturity has not been interested in gynecology. The Church is writing theology in this moment, and the intent is to proclaim that in the birth of this Child – Mary’s Child – God enters history as the most certain sign of God’s love for the world. That’s the big deal.

How the conception happened pales in comparison, and having fist fights over the details only serves to distract from news so good it staggers the imagination. When you are confessing the faith of the Church in one of the Creeds, remember that “conceived by the Holy Spirit” should happily be understood that God was at the heart of this Child coming into the earth because of God’s great love for an earth that had and still does make a mess of the dream that God has for whole and healthy human beings. Jesus who becomes a human being is among us to show us the way back to our truest selves and the way back to God’s heart.

After the angel said that this birth would be a thing of God, there must have been a huge pause which angels (like some preachers I know) decided to fill with words.

Gabriel who may have been more nervous than Mary says all kinds of things about the Child and cites the pregnancy of Mary's cousin as evidence that with God anything is possible. Finally Gabriel is quiet. Even angels have to be quiet every now and then, since the decision about accepting the role God has set for Mary belongs to Mary.

Mary says "yes" to this new thing born in the heart of God, and soon to be born through her own body. I imagine Gabriel and a whole bunch of other angels who were eavesdropping were relieved. Mary's "yes" was necessary, and she speaks it.

Being pregnant and giving birth are two things that men with an ounce of sense should not talk about. It is for the sisters to bear witness to all that bringing new life into the world involves. When I have listened to the sisters, and I have

listened, the reports have been that neither pregnancy nor birth, are all that much fun. Many of my sources suggest that if men had to endure pregnancy and giving birth the human race would have ground to a halt millennia ago.

Mary takes on the responsibility of pregnancy and birth. And when all the struggles were over she must have cradled the Child in her arms. I am guessing that she said sweet things to the Baby because that is the ministry that mothers have with babies.

The texts are clear that Mary, like most mothers, worried for her child. Jesus wandered off by himself at age 12 when the family was in Jerusalem for the holidays. Later when the Child was grown and engaged in the public ministry that was his to do, Mary worried about the strain of it all on him. The Gospels report that Mary and the family tried to take Jesus away from the crowds. Maybe give him time to rest and eat chicken soup, and come to his senses. Mary was worried that Jesus was crazy. The text says she thought Jesus was “beside

himself.” That is the translator’s way of making the text sound nicer than it was. Mary thought Jesus was off his rocker, and she wanted to take him home until he recovered.

In the end Mary had to do what no parent would wish on their worst enemy: she had to watch her Child – the one that had grown in her body and disturbed her sleep and eaten at her table and worried her on a bunch of occasions – be murdered in one of the most brutal ways possible. The Mater Dei became the Mater Dolorosa. Mother of God become the Mother of Sorrows.

Somehow Mary survived that enormous grief, and when Jesus’ was vindicated and his mission fulfilled three days later she was among the believers. She saw – perhaps more clearly than any of the rest of us ever could – that this Child truly was thing of God. That through the Child’s death and resurrection the earth and all it’s people were made new.

Given all that Mary was and did the Church crowned her with the title, “Regina Coelli.” “Queen of heaven.” If you

want to argue about that find someone who is interested in the conversation. I am not.

I am more than willing to honor this one “blessed among women” in any way that can be found. For in her is a model of discipleship that stood the most rigorous tests, asked questions that are on all our minds, and somehow found the way to remain faithful to the God whose life was poured into the Child for the sake of the world.

Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers remember Mary in a lovely prayer – called the Rosary. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.”

I am glad that Mary does that. I’m sure she has the ear of God and I for one need all the help I can get.

From day to day I am glad for every prayer said on behalf. Many of you pray for me as I pray for you. It helps.

And if Mary wants to join in our prayers for one another that's fine with me.

And I will take all the help I can get in the hour of my death. Woody Allen said he wasn't afraid of dying; he just didn't want to be there when it happened. I understand that, but it doesn't work that way.

If the Blessed Virgin Mary is at my side in my dying time I suspect she will wipe away the sweat from my brow, dry my tears, and tell the truth that she knows from experience: "everything is going to be alright."

The Blessed Virgin Mary. A name spoken so often, and I hope always spoken among us with great respect. She said "Yes" to God in circumstances that required a huge leap of faith. She bore the Child in her own body and nurtured him toward his fullness as a human being. She worried for him, and very near the end of the story she wept for him as only a mother can weep for a child. When the story started over she continued her discipleship. And even now is faithful to God

**and loving of us. Gabriel got it right the first time they met,
“Blessed are you among women.”**