

## **Mary, Mother of Our Lord**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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

Dear Friends:

“Bothering Jesus” is a standup comedy show starring the comic Kathleen Madigan. If you have Netflix, you can watch it. “Bothering Jesus” is the name of the show. The name comes from a difference that Kathleen noticed between herself, someone who was raised Roman Catholic, and Protestants in the South. Kathleen says this about these Southern Protestants: *They have a direct relationship with Jesus. And they speak of it like that. “You, know what– Me and my relationship with Jesus? I love Jesus. Jesus loves me.” It’s a direct, very solid relationship with Jesus. And I thought, wow, really? You guys go straight to Jesus!*

*In a Catholic school, I was given a laundry list of people to contact– the nun said because otherwise I’m bothering Jesus. “You are gonna call these people, Kathleen, before you bother Jesus. You can start with your guardian angel. He’s got nothing to do, 24 hours a day, except tend to your needs. If he’s not available, you can speak to the saint in charge of the activity you’re upset about. Every single saint has been assigned an assignment. You can speak to Jesus’ mother. You can give Mary a shout. But you are not to bother Jesus!”*

[\[Click here: Funny video on Youtube\]](#)

Mary is a good way to compare and contrast Catholics and Protestants. For example: In the Catholic Church, today is the feast of the Assumption of Mary. Celebrating that Mary was assumed directly into heaven like Elijah. To which Protestants respond, “You’re making a pretty big assumption.” But individual Catholics do not agree amongst themselves about the distinctive importance of Mary. And individual Protestants do not conform to any one perspective on the importance of Mary. The Lutherans will tell you that we NEVER pray to saints and we never speak in Latin. Except at weddings, when we sing the prayer to Mary. *Ave Maria*. In Latin! Lutherans, Protestants, Catholics. We disagree among the churches. We disagree within the churches. About a lot of topics, but Mary especially seems to invite discussion and debate.

Mary’s specialness is founded upon her participation in the incarnation. Christianity believes that Jesus is the intersection of God and humanity. Jesus is fully human. And Jesus is fully God, or some say, fully divine. And Mary is the instrument through which Jesus became human. She is the means of the incarnation. And that places her in a role that no other human being has ever occupied. According to Christianity.

I said that Mary seems to invite discussion and debate. That’s true in the pages of the New

Testament as well as among Christians and between churches of various kinds. Mark, whose gospel we've been reading this year, does not think that the birth of Jesus is worth mentioning. His depictions of Mary are unflattering. She mainly seems to represent the family of Jesus and the family's objection to the ministry and mission of Jesus. In Mark, Mary does not witness the crucifixion of her son. That detail comes from the fourth gospel. If Mark were the only book in the New Testament, we would not have much information or perspective on Mary.

Paul, the man who wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, thinks it is important that Jesus became human, and was "born of a woman." But Paul never mentions the name of the mother of Jesus, or anything else about her.

The two New Testament authors who tell us most of what we know about Mary are Matthew and Luke. They wrote later than Paul and Mark. From them we get the Christmas story. It's likely that Matthew and Luke are familiar with the gospel according to Mark, and that they felt that the birth of Jesus was highly significant, and so they added it into their respective gospels. In both Matthew and Luke, Mary is a virgin, and the birth of Jesus is miraculous. Luke, however, goes further than Matthew in what he tells us about Mary. It's from Luke that we get the story of the annunciation to Mary by Gabriel, and from Luke that we get the story of the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, and from Luke that we get the miraculous co-birth of John the Baptist, and from Luke that we get the song of Mary, which we know by its Latin name, *Magnificat*. From Luke we also are informed that Mary was present in the Jerusalem church community after the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus.

So there is a spectrum of ideas about Mary in the New Testament. And clearly, it is from Luke that we get the bulk of what the New Testament has to say about her. Around the turn of the fifth century, Saint Augustine asserted that original sin was transmitted from one person to another and from one generation to another by sexual intercourse. The flaw of humanity—original sin—was inescapably knotted up with sex and procreation. Augustine's idea was theological and philosophical. It is not stated anywhere in the Bible. However, Augustine's idea has had enormous influence. Human sexuality was stained. Mary's virginity created an unstained womb for Jesus. Allowing Jesus alone to be conceived without sin, which is what the Bible says he was: sinless. From this theological perspective comes the idea that Mary was uniquely pure. And around that notion of purity, over the centuries the Roman Catholic church has fortified Mary with various doctrines. That she was immaculately conceived—her own birth was miraculous and without sin. That she was perpetually a virgin—she never engaged in sexual relations with anyone, before or after the birth of Jesus. That she was assumed into heaven—too pure to pass away into eternal life in the way that most Christians do.

I am not going to judge the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. But it is important to know that the virginity of Mary according to Luke is not about purity. It is first and foremost about the incarnation. Jesus could not have had a human father, because he was the unique son of God. Mary's virginity is important, in other words, because God is the father of Jesus. Not Joseph. Secondly, the virginal conception of Jesus is a miraculous birth accompanied by an

annunciation. Which is an Old Testament pattern. For example, how Sarah gave birth to Isaac. And especially, how Hannah gave birth to Samuel. And not coincidentally, how Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist. Luke's telling of Mary is part of establishing the Jewishness of Jesus, his bonafide credentials as a good Jew, and how Jesus' coming into the world is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. Not a replacement of it.

So Mary has a big role, and a unique role, as Luke tells it. I think that purity is the wrong lesson to learn from Mary. We human beings at our best seek to be better people. I think that being a good girl, being a good woman, and being a good mother are worthwhile goals. As are the goals of begin a good boy, a good man, and a good husband. But if Mary is held up as the ideal woman due to ideas about her purity, then I don't think we are helping females to be their best. I don't think we're being fair to Mary. And I certainly don't think we are being true to Luke and to the other New Testament writers.

Each Christmas Eve, most of us find a moment of stillness. For the vast majority of churchgoers, that moment comes when we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" by candlelight. In that moment of stillness, many of us think of Mary holding her newborn child. Or nursing her newborn child. Maybe Joseph is there. Maybe the cattle are lowing. But it is a moment of parenting, and of being parented. And I think in that moment, some of us are truly able to grasp the incarnation. That God truly became human. And therefore, in our very humanity, in the most profound episodes of being human, we meet God. I think Mary alone draws us into that mystery. No matter how many shepherds and donkeys and angels and wise men may be crowded around the manger. And that is what she does best. She brings the incarnation to us. And she brings us to the incarnation. That is not trivial. And that isn't only for Christmas Eve.

One of the people who set Mary's song to music is Johann Sebastian Bach. In his *Magnificat in D*, there is about 75 seconds where the chorus sings "all generations." Just those two words. *Omnes generationes*. Over and over and over. All generations. All, all, all, all generations. Mary said, "From this day, all generations will call me blessed." She was right about that. Bach really stretches out the meaning of those two words. They call it tone painting, or text painting, when the music illustrates the meaning of the words. All generations do call her blessed. In various ways, and for various reasons. Today, in our congregation, and in our section of the Christian family, we are just one more generation to join the song. Amen.