Sunday, March 7, 1982
MARY (No. 2 in a Series)
Luke 1:26-31,34-38; Mark 3:31-35

We don't know very much about Mary, the mother of Jesus, from the Bible stories. We don't know how she looked, what family she came from, whether or not she had brothers or sisters, how old she was when Jesus was born, or how old she was when she died. After the death of Jesus in the New Testament accounts, we hear nothing more about her.

We even know very little about what thoughts she might've had about her son Jesus as he grew up and later began his ministry. The Apostle Paul who wrote most of the New Testament doesn't even mention her name — he refers to her only indirectly. Here's his statement in his letter to the Galatians, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law."

There are lots of traditions about Mary. Most of them see her as a simple peasant young woman, probably not more than sixteen or seventeen years old when she became pregnant with Jesus. And according to tradition her mother's name was Ann. Another tradition is that Joseph, her husband, died when Mary was still a young woman and that she had to raise the family as a widow. We do know that Jesus had brothers and sisters.

Christian tradition has also given Mary many names and titles and through the years she has even come to be worshipped by many. Four Roman Catholic dogmas have been centered around the person of Mary and must be believed as articles of faith for the devout Roman Catholic Christian.

The first two dogmas concern her diving motherhood and her virginity, both declared by Councils of the early Church. The third dogma, proclaimed in 1854, declares her immaculate conception which spares her of all stain of original sin. Simply stated, this dogma declares that Mary was conceived in a miraculous way so that she was born without sin. And the fourth dogma, declared in 1950, by Pope Pius XII, proclaims her assumption, body and soul into heaven. The Vatican is still pondering whether the Virgin Mary experienced death at all, and whether the traditional and widespread faith in her perpetual virginity is necessary. All of these doctrines are an attempt to make Mary a super-human being. Thus, through the years, Mary has been distorted by tradition. She has been called "Queen of Heaven," "Perfect Lady," "Ideal Woman," "Mother of God," and more. Sometimes it's difficult to find Mary, the human being.

This morning, in order to understand Mary better, let's look at her as a human being and to do wo we will look at several different episodes in the Gospel stories.

1. When we first meet Mary in the Bible, we are simply told that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin named Mary. His announcement to her was that God's promise of a Messiah would be fulfilled through her.

Like any thoughtful human being, Mary had a few questions for the messenger. She wanted to know what it all meant before she got too involved. Luke says that she was greatly troubled with the message and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. (Luke 1:26-29)

After being reassured by the angel that the birth of her child would be good news for the whole world, Mary accepted the mission. There would be nine months of preparation and adjustment. She was not expected to deliver immediately. And as time passed, she would become more and more aware of what the birth of this child would mean for the world.

Many good things need a time to grow and mature. We too often need a period of preparation for some big event that's going to happen. And as God promised, as Mary's pregnancy progresses, she became more and more aware that this birth was to be something very special.

All through the announcement, the pregnancy and the birth of her child, we see in Mary a person who is faithful and her trust in God is total and unashamed. In this way, Mary is a model for all of us, women and men, in her faith and trust.

Too often, however, Mary has been described as a king of passive instrument. But the Gospel stories imply something different. We see in her a confident, questioning, decision-making human being. In fact, the Gospel of Luke makes Mary an active participant in the drama of Jesus'birth, accepting it through an act of free consent, and meditating up on the meaning of her child's future mission. We are told by Luke that "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

2. Another series of stories in the Gospels give us a different dimension in our understanding of Mary as a human being. Even though Mary is the mother of Jesus — as her son grows and matures and begins his public ministry, Mary at times is confused about him. She doesn't always understand what he is doing or what his mission is.

In three of the Gospels, we are told of an occasion when Mary and the brothers of Jesus wanted to see him, but he is surrounded by a crowd of people, and they can't get his attention, so they send a message through the crowd that they want to talk with him. When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are asking for him, he said to the crowd, that whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister.

We don't know if Mary and other relatives of Jesus wanted him to go home with them. Had he been separated from them for so long that they were worried? Had they heard of his controversial ministry and were worried that his enemies would get him? Maybe they were even embarrassed by some of his teachings and statements?

We are not told what motivated Mary to seek out her son, but surely, she experienced puzzlement, anxiety, and confusion.

The Gospel writers are remarkably free of the effort to cove up the confusion and questionable motivations of the disciples of Jesus during his ministry, so Mary was surely not immune to this confusion and doubt about her son and the Kingdom which he proclaimed. Maybe she wanted and expected a special relationship with him. That is the confusion and temptation not only of Mary, but of all of us who claim to follow Christ.

Often, we Christians want to sort of capture Jesus and keep him all to ourselves. But the call of Christ is to draw us out of ourselves and our cozy groups and clubs. God will have no part of our division of people into outsiders and insiders, saved and unsaved. That's not our division to make. God's people are not part of any particular family relationship, race, religion, or nationality. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," said Jesus.

Perhaps the early church was aware of the possibility that Mary and some of the intimate disciples might become objects of worship and devotion. The church preserved, therefore, a few stories which acted as a counterweight to this tendency.

According to one story, someone in a crowd once shouted to Jesus: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked,” to which Jesus responded — “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” (Luke 11:27-28)

These stories do not constitute a put-down of Mary. Rather they are a reminder to all of us of the confusion and temptation which are a part of the life of faith. We recognize in Mary the struggle of all believers to overcome the temptation to keep Jesus to ourselves, to want privileged access to him. Mary’s confusion is also our confusion.

3. Another story in the Gospel of John reveals a yet different dimension in the life of Mary and the early disciples. According to John’s Gospel, Mary and several of the other disciples were present at the foot of the cross while Jesus was dying. One of the last words of Jesus was to Mary his mother. Jesus looked at Mary and also at his beloved disciple John. He then said to Mary — “Woman, behold your son,” and to John, “Behold your mother.”

But why did Jesus ask the discipled named John to look after his mother? After all, Jesus had brothers and sisters.

Perhaps it was because Mary had had some difficulty in understanding her son’ministry and his trail and death sentence. Maybe the rest of the family was having the same problem.

Thus, Jesus being concerned about the spiritual welfare of his mothers, which the family could not provide at this time, tried to make sure that she was taken care of.

Mary would need a deeper and more understanding community of believers than her family could at that time provide.

Here we get a glimpse of what the church is to be about — it is to be a loving, caring community of people who look after each other. We are all brothers and sisters to each other — God’s family is wider than just our immediate families as important as they are.

Following the crucifixion of Jesus, we don’t know very much about Mary. She passes from the scene in the early church.

In fact, up through the second century, Christian tradition ignores Mary. In the second century, however, there arose a movement called Gnosticism, and through this movement Mary begins to be exalted.

Then in the fourth century, after the Christian church had been established as the exclusive religion of the Roman Empire, teachings and traditions about Mary began to develop very rapidly and they have continued to develop within the Roman Catholic branch of the Christian Church.

With the coming of the Protestant Reformation, beginning with Martin Luther, devotion and worship of Mary quickly began to face among Protestants, but continued to grow within the Roman Catholic Church.

When then does May and her faith have to say to us today as Christians?

1. First, as already indicated, Mary is a model for us in several ways — her active faith, her willingness to be God's instrument, and her love and care as a human being. Furthermore, Mary's words in what has come to be called "the Magnificat" are a constant reminder to us of God's care for the poor and the needy. (Luke 1:46-55)

Throughout history Mary has had a special attraction for the poor, for the down-and-out, for the oppressed. Historians of religion frequently point out that we find women leaders and female imagery more frequently among the religions of the privileges. Liberty itself is often portrayed as a woman.

2. Secondly, Mary reminds us that our faith is more than a masculine enterprise. Religion is both feminine and masculine and more. The use of feminine symbols was not unusual in the Old Testament or in Judaism, although they have often been overlooked or covered up. Israel saw itself as God's bride, Israel as mother, and God's Wisdom is often personified as feminine.

All religions have their strong feminine side and feminine images. When this dimension of religion is ignored or suppressed, it springs up in unusual ways. Thus, the veneration of Mary does not come so much from the religious example of Mary herself but is more of a symbol around which to focus or draw attention to the feminine in religion.

But we have to go even beyond this. It is not enough to change our words and no longer speak of God as "he" or of the church as "she." God is more than male or female. We need new metaphors for God that go beyond masculine or feminine and yet include them.

As we noted last Sunday, God is not just "out there," or "up there;" God is the End and the Beginning, the Center of creation; God is present in creation and in each one of us and yet God transcends us and is beyond us. No pronoun, male or female is adequate. Yet both male and female are made in God's image. Amen.

Discussion questions

1. Religious tradition uses the concept of a "virgin birth" to signify that a child is especially chosen by God. Can you think of other ways to illustrate the idea that God has chosen someone for a special role? Or do you think God choose people for special roles?

2. Do you think women and men have different roles in the church? If so, what are some of them?

3. How do you think of God? Are masculine and feminine images helpful or not when attempting to describe God?

4. Mary was at times confused about Jesus. What confuses you the most about the Christian faith?