Sunday, December 22, 2002
MARY
Luke 1:26-38

When you think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, what image comes to your mind? A sweet, innocent young woman? A peasant girl? Or do you think of those statues of Mary that are seen in some churches or religious bookstores? In the Protestant Christian tradition, we don't talk very much about Mary, so maybe you haven't given her much thought.

Another problem is that the New Testament in the Bible doesn't tell us very much about her. She is not physically described, so we don't know how she looked. We don't know whether she was tall or short, thin or stout. Nothing is revealed about her family. What was her father's name? Did she have sisters and brothers? No one knows. How old was she when Jesus was born? No one knows. How old was she when she died? No one knows.

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 one statement about her in his letter to the Galatians: "When the time had fully come, God sent the Son, born of woman, born under the law." That's it. Nothing more.

Hundreds of years later, as the Christian church grew, a number of traditions about Mary began to appear. Their origin is difficult to trace. Most of these traditions describe her as a devout young peasant woman, probably between the ages of 14 to 16 when Jesus was born. According to these traditions, her mother's name was Ann. Another tradition holds that her husband Joseph was older than she when they married and that he died years before she did, leaving her to raise the family as a single parent. Yet another tradition is that Joseph had been married before and, when he and Mary married, he brought several young children into the new family. Several New Testament writers tell us that there were at least six other children in the household with Mary and Joseph — in other words, Jesus had four brothers and two sisters. One of his brothers, James, is described in the New Testament as being a respected leader in the early church in Jerusalem following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Even though the New Testament and the traditions about her do not tell us all we would like to know about Mary, we have enough information to know that she had a deep faith in God and that she was a strong and positive influence in the life of Jesus and in the early church. She was also a woman who was not afraid to speak up and ask the right questions. She had the courage to go against the prevailing culture of her time, a culture in which women were second-class citizens — a problem that is still present in many places today.

In the past year, we have all come to know more about the role of women in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, where, because of a deadly combination of male ego and bad theology, women are feared and oppressed. The culture in those places does not want women to be seen, much less heard. And the men in those cultures certainly do not believe that God uses women to reveal God's will.

Even in our own culture, it is ironic that women who give birth to boys, some of whom later become priests, are told by those same sons that they can't do certain things or participate fully in the church.

It is helpful to remember that in the time and culture where Mary lived, life for almost all women was difficult. They were considered the property of their fathers and, if they married, became the property of their husbands. They couldn't own property and often received much harsher penalties for their crimes than men. A woman could be stoned to death if it was determined that she was not a virgin when she got married, but a man could summarily divorce his wife with a piece of paper.

Women were kept under control by being made to feel unworthy, unclean, and less intelligent. That makes it all the more incredible that the Christmas story, the stories of Advent, and the stories of the crucifixion and Easter depend so heavily on the intuitive power and courageous faith of women. These brave women took off the metaphorical "burkas" of their time and spoke even before they were spoken to. They did the very thing for which Jesus was later crucified: they spoke on behalf of God. They allowed themselves to be channels for God's grace, and they did it graciously.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is an excellent example. Too often, she has been described as a kind of passive instrument. The gospel stories about her, however, imply something quite different. According to Luke's account, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you," and in effect told her that she had been chosen by God for a special purpose, she replied — and I'm paraphrasing—"Wait a minute. I want to know more about this before I get too involved."

This shows a lot of astuteness in Mary. She had no doubt learned through experience that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Or maybe she didn't want to get her expectations too high. She wanted no more disappointment. People had made glorious promises to her before but had not followed through. The angel brought her what was supposed to be good news, yet she had questions about it. That's okay. If you study the history of inspired spiritual leaders, it's evident that they wrestled with God. They agonized over what is truly God's will. God does not expect you to be a passive instrument.

This is not unusual. Haven't you, when someone you've never met before says, "I've got a great opportunity for you," responded by saying, "Wait a minute. What's the catch?"

Mary was following in a long tradition of courageous women in the Bible who changed things. There was Miriam, the sister of Moses, Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and now Mary, the mother of Jesus.

If they had covered their faces and silenced their voices, then where would we be now? Remember, too, that it was three women who were the first to experience the power of the resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. The first reaction of the men to whom they told the good news was skepticism. According to Luke's gospel, the men thought it was an "idle tale," that is, a story that hysterical women might tell.

And there's that wonderful story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. At first, she was reluctant to talk honestly about herself and her life. As the conversation proceeded and she sensed she could trust Jesus and that he would listen to her, she spoke of her deepest longings. I like to think that the main reason Jesus was able to listen to women and learn from their wisdom was because of Mary, his mother. He listened to her as a spokesperson for God.

Mary was able to see herself as an active participant in the drama of God's redemption. She is a genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship and response to God's love. She was willing to let God be born in and through her. She was willing to let her soul magnify the Lord.

It is not surprising that throughout the history of the Christian church, Mary has always had a special attraction for the poor and the suffering. Historians of religion have pointed out that women leaders and feminine imagery are often found more frequently among the religions of the oppressed than among the religions of the privileged. That's because women have so often been the oppressed.

Liberty itself is often portrayed as a woman. Our own Statue of Liberty is a good example. It is the goddesses and prophetesses, the League of Women Voters, the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, and other women like Mary who can make life difficult for the religiously or politically sanctified establishments in any age.

Have you also noticed in all the news about terrorism that you seldom, if ever, find women in the terrorist cells we have learned so much about these days? Why is that? One commentator suggests that the answer is because women give birth. He claims that changes everything. If men gave birth, the amount of violence in the world would drop dramatically.

According to the words of Mary in Luke's gospel, God is always turning things upside down. It is God who puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of low degree. These are words we do not always want to hear. We would rather hear words that appeal to our preferences and prejudices. But that is not what Mary, Jesus, and the Bible do. They give us hard truths. They appeal to our best qualities.

Let Mary remind you during this Christmas season that there is a difference between a false Messiah and the true one. A false Messiah, like any false leader, caters to and inflames the fears, hates, angers, and resentments of people and drives them to destruction rather than to salvation or self-realization. The true Messiah leads you through love to the loving God.

The story of Mary giving birth to Jesus in a manger can also teach us to practice hospitality. Although Luke's story of Christmas tells us there was no room in the inn, Mary and Joseph were not turned away. Space was found for them in the stable.

Christian congregations need to be more hospitable, and we the people in our own beloved First-Plymouth sometimes forget this. Last week, a young woman put a letter on my desk. Here's part of what she wrote:

"We arrived at church on a Sunday morning just in time. There were three of us. The music had started, and the church seemed to be filled. We were used to going to the 9:00 service but decided for some reason to go later this week. We tried the balcony, and it was filled except for one small bench and another half of a small bench. The two people that had walked in front of us sat on the bench large enough for at least four. Thinking they might let us have at least one seat, I walked up to it and was abruptly told that they were sitting there."

"So we proceeded downstairs, and being so shocked, we decided to go somewhere else to pray that day. What I have not yet told you is that the two people I was with were my boyfriend and an eleven-year-old child. Since we are a very young couple in our early twenties, we look very odd having an eleven-year-old girl with us. She is not our child. I am a big-sister, a mentor for her. I met her almost three years ago and have seen her through very trying times. What

she really looks forward to every week is Sunday when I take her to church. This week we were told there was no room for us. That still did not stop us from putting our money in the offering plate, going elsewhere to worship at the moment, and coming back to try again next week."

"The reason I am writing about this to you is in the hope you will be able to tell this story to the congregation, to remind them about how the Christmas spirit of hospitality should be with us all year."

I'm glad that a young woman wrote this letter to me because it is helpful during this Christmas season to remember that Jesus learned a lot from his mother, Mary, and from other women — and so can we. Amen.