

There's Something About Mary

Part 1: Reclaiming Mary from Church Tradition

Luke 1:5-7, 11-13, 24-49
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If you grew up Presbyterian, or basically in any Protestant denomination, you may not be aware that there is an official field of church study called Mariology. Mariology is the theological study of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is primarily active among Roman Catholics. **We Protestants, for the most part, don't spend much time thinking about Mary.** So when the Worship & Music ministry team recently brainstormed ideas on what our congregation might focus on during this season of Advent, I knew I had a lot to learn when we settled on giving Mary her due. In fact, I have never had to read and study so much for a sermon series, especially from Roman Catholic sources.

One of the goals set by the ministry team for this Advent is to **lift Mary out of her common storybook setting.** For much of what many of us know about her is limited to cute Christmas pageants and those flannel felt-board cutouts from children church school classes decades ago. **What any of us know and believe about Mary, therefore, is deeply influenced by our own particular faith background.**

Today's focus will be on understanding the Mary of early church tradition. In the next few weeks we will take a closer look at what the Bible actually reveals about Mary, and then how she is viewed in progressive and feminist understandings. Three weeks from today, we reach the highlight with our Chancel Choir's performance during worship of John Rutter's *The Magnificat*. If you don't know what the Magnificat is, then this sermon series is especially geared for you.

But first, we must start way back in time with the developing tradition within early Christianity. Since both the gospels of Luke and Matthew mention that Mary was a virgin, one of the earliest debates was whether or not Mary remained a virgin not only before, during and after the birth of Jesus, but also for the rest of her life. This is referred to as the **perpetual virginity of Mary.** More on that in a moment.

In the 2nd century, early church father Irenaeus called Mary the **"second Eve"** because her willful obedience to God undid the harm that was done through Eve's disobedient choice to eat the forbidden fruit. By the 4th century, early versions of the **"Hail Mary"** prayer were common, based on Luke's account of the Angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary.

The Council of Ephesus in 431 CE officially declared Mary to be the **"Mother of God."** They coined the Greek term *Theotokos*, which literally means "God-bearer." It was agreed that Jesus took divinity from God the Father and humanity from his mother.

But the title “Mother of God” was really more about affirming their understanding of the nature of Jesus – his undivided personhood and nature expressed in both his divinity and his humanity.

There was a big growth and development of Mariology during the Middle Ages, beginning after the Great Schism in 1054 split Christianity into the Orthodox Church in the east, and the Roman Catholic Church in the west. Today, we'll be following the Roman Catholic tradition.

Though not declared an official **church dogma (which means an infallible Church teaching)** until several centuries later, there was a widespread belief in the **Assumption of Mary**. (And that's not about making assumptions about who Mary was.) This teaching declared that Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was taken up, assumed, body and soul directly into heavenly glory. Pope Pius XII declared it official church dogma in 1950. But he deliberately left open the question of whether Mary actually died before her Assumption into heaven.

Another belief about Mary that circulated since medieval times, but again not declared an official church dogma until 1854 by Pope Pius IX, came to be known as the **Immaculate Conception**. Most of us Protestants have heard of that one, but we tend to confuse it with the virgin birth of Jesus. No, this teaching isn't about Jesus' conception, but rather Mary's conception by her mother. Basically, it states that Mary was conceived without original sin. Here's the actual language from Pope Pius IX in 1854:

We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful. — Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854

It's important to note here that this definition regards Mary being preserved from the contagion or stain of original sin only, saying nothing about personal sin and living a sinless life. From what I could deduce from my reading, however, though not official dogma the Roman Catholic Church basically believes Mary did remain sinless. This was not of her own doing, however, but because of the ‘merits of Christ.’ This allowed her the unique status as a gift from God to allow her to become the stainless Mother of God. Does that mean, however, that Mary didn't need a savior? According to church teaching, yes she did, since God's grace was still required for her to remain sinless.

Getting confused yet? But wait, there's more!

Jumping back to the belief in a perpetual and **Ever-Virgin Mary**, there first had to be an explanation of the difference between virginity during child birth and virginity of conception. Don't worry, I'm not clear on this one either. But this dogma meant that Mary had no other children except Jesus, and therefore the scriptural inferences that suggest that Jesus had brothers and sisters are explained away. It was thought that with her body serving as a vessel and temple for the divine Christ child, it was important that the temple of her body remain pure.

Another doctrine of the Catholic Church, though not an official dogma, elevated her to the title of **Queen of Heaven**. Other names include Queen of Heaven and Earth, Queen of the World, and even Queen and Ruler of the Universe.

This is the particular depiction of Mary that I've chosen and printed in color on the cover of this morning's worship bulletin. You'll notice that she is wearing a royal crown, and her head is surrounded by 12 stars. She's clearly standing above the earth with the banner reading *Regina Pacis*, the Latin for Queen of Peace. When you look at paintings of Mary, which flourished during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, she is most commonly wearing a blue colored dress or cloak. Blue was the color of royalty, especially of an empress, and sometimes divinity. Red is the next most common color.

Now, this Queen of Heaven doctrine uses as its foundation a couple of verses in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 12.

12 ¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. (NIV)

From all this, Mary the Mother of God (as in giving birth to Jesus the Savior and Redeemer) is thought to actually participate in God's plan of salvation. This has caused much confusion, however, when some Catholics use the title of Mary as a **Co-Redemptrix**. This doctrine does not mean that Mary has been elevated in a way that she participates as an equal in the redemption of the human race. Catholics strongly maintain that Christ is the only redeemer. After all, Mary herself needed redemption and was redeemed by the grace of her own son. Co-redemptrix refers, then, to an indirect or unequal but important participation by Mary in the redemption process. After all, without her consent, the incarnation of God in Jesus wouldn't have happened in the first place.

This leads to another Roman Catholic doctrine about Mary that is often misunderstood. That's the title of Mary as a **Mediatrix**. Even though Catholics teach that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and humans, they have also taught since early times that Mary plays an **intercessory role** for all believers, especially those who request her intercession through prayer. Mary, of all the Catholic saints, is seen as having the greatest intercessory power. She is seen as a principal dispenser, therefore, of God's graces, even to the point of being an Advocate for the people of God.

Protestants, however, teach that we all have a direct line to God. But historically, when people focused on a male God that was angry and punishing (and to a lesser extent, Jesus as well) they discerned that what was needed is a buffer zone, a mediator with a feminine touch of compassion and understanding. Mary was the perfect person for the job. It was also thought to help convert those who came from indigenous religions that had a feminine image of the Divine.

All of these dogmas and doctrines, of course, have led to a high level of devotion of Mary. Yet Protestants have also misunderstood this throughout the ages, to the point of almost completely diminishing altogether the role of Mary in the story of faith. According to Catholics, **devotion, adoration, and bestowing honor to the Virgin Mary does not amount to worship, as many of us have been taught**. She is not an object of worship. That is reserved for God. Mary is viewed as subordinate to Christ, but uniquely so, in that she is seen as above all other creatures. **Pope John Paul II**, not long ago, stated, **"Among all devotions, that which most consecrates and conforms a soul to our Lord is devotion to Mary."** In other words, **devotion to Mary helps lead Catholics to God, Christ, and the Church.**

Therefore, I feel bit of a warning may be in order at this point. As an inclusive community of faith, one that respects and affirms diversity, **we must be careful not to disparage, let alone trash the beliefs of others that differ from our own.** Most Roman Catholics hold these teaching about Mary (as shocking as they may seem to us) dear to their hearts. **They play an important role in their spiritual growth and journey of faith.**

You can only imagine, however, what happened during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, and even more so during the Enlightenment. To that we can add what has been reclaimed by progressive and feminist theology about the role of Mary in our own life of faith.

But that's the next two Sundays. I know this has been a lot of information, and if you're like me, I bet your brain hurts.

Amen.

[A list of resources will appear at the end of this sermon series.]