

“Mary and Child”  
Lake Shore Baptist Church  
December 30, 2018  
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When I was growing up, I was warned that Catholics weren't really Christians because—among other things—they prayed to Mary. In later years I came to understand and appreciate the Catholic practice of praying to the saints, and eventually I came to see how the veneration of Mary had helped to preserve the divine feminine in the imagination of the people. She is, for so many, a human link to the divine—so like us as to be relatable, so deeply connected to God as to help facilitate our connection.

Like mother, like son. So too Jesus has been for so many a link to the divine. Human, like us, and relatable, yet also divine and thus able to help facilitate our connection to the One who so often seems unknowable, untouchable, and mysterious.

In Mary and in Jesus, our false concepts of a harsh, distant, exacting God are replaced by the warm bosom of a loving mother and a God who became flesh and dwelt among us. There is perhaps no greater image to challenge our misconceptions of a violent, domineering God as the image of God as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in his mother's arms.

There are perhaps as many ideas about Mary as there are people on this earth, but today I'll share a small bit of my idea of her. Hear now these words from Jesus' mother:

Greetings. I am the one woman from Jesus' genealogy everyone knows. My name is Mary, Maria, Mother of God, the Virgin, Holy Mother. I am known around the world and in many cultures. They have painted me onto canvases and in cathedrals, portrayed me in books and in music as the ever-young, ever-so-innocent virgin. But I am here to tell you I have never been innocent. It was if I came out of the womb grieving, as if, deep within me I carried my ancestral pain and the suffering of my people. The cries of Tamar, the fears of Rahab, the poetry of Ruth, and the moans of Bathsheba have long echoed in my soul. The longing of lonely people, the crushing need for a savior, the ever-thwarted hope of an oppressed people—all this rocked and creaked inside my body so often and with such force I thought I would topple.

But I did not topple. I was taken into the very bosom of God and made into a vessel.

To be virgin means to be whole, pure, undivided, to belong to one's self, to possess one's self, to be enslaved by no vice, addiction, or self-destructive greed. Being one who has felt the conflicts of the ages warring inside my heart, I never would have guessed myself pure. I felt, instead, stained by the blood of my people—from the blood of Abel to the blood of Uriah, the blood of the Levite's concubine to the blood of the Canaanites. I did not know why the stories affected me so. Why it was I could not forget, though many people had forgotten. Why it was I could not sleep for the vividness of my memory. Nothing about this alertness to pain felt pure to me. It felt twisted, unrelenting, oppressive, dark. I thought there was something wrong with me.

But the heavens judged otherwise. They felt someone such as me—one who had borne the agony of her people—would be most ripe for conceiving heaven-sent, human-born hope.

This is what is meant by the virgin birth. It has been said God needed a virgin to be born in. Not an untouched female but an undistracted human being, untainted by self-deception. Someone who knew themselves and their world with open-eyed honesty. Someone with enough honest space within to grow the seed of God, someone available for swelling out with God. It is said God still looks for such persons, male and female wombs that are fertile.

Let me tell you, it is not easy being the birth-giver to God. It was a life-long labor, knowing that this one I so loved and cherished would someday be pierced. But being his mother sustained me through his horrible death and the three agonizing days he lay in the grave. Being his mother is what sustains me now, as I look down upon the inhabitants of the earth and see that they still kill one another, beat one another, and oppress one another, which feels like my son being dead all over again. I see the seemingly endless string of violence upon violence, the madness of it all, the senseless acting out of aggression and rage. I see it and I weep ancient tears, the tears I have collected from the centuries before me and the centuries after.

And yet, I do not lose hope, I tell you, because I have held in my own arms the very Son of God. People who have known suffering sometimes think God dead or absent, capricious or otherwise unavailable. But I know differently. I have seen God with my own eyes. God so small and so vulnerable it was up to me to keep him alive, to feed him, to change him, to nourish and protect him.

This is not a God who is dead. If you had heard him cry when he was hungry, you would know how alive he was and is! This is not a God who is absent. This is a God more present, more close, more real than you can fathom.

When I remember the day of his birth, I no longer shed tears, even though I know what pain comes with bearing that child into the world. No, when I think of his birth, I outright cackle at the madness of a God becoming baby. It is so absurd, so brilliant, so unexpected, so oddly effective, so stubbornly hopeful amidst raging oppressions, so undefeatable in its redemptive power. That I should participate in God's coming is astounding. I thank the wombs of my grandmothers and great grandmothers for making it possible. For every human being who has ever been brave enough or virgin enough or expansive enough to birth a little bit of God anew into the world, I give thanks.

For you who listen to my story, his story, year after year, looking for a measure of grace and mercy to reach you anew, I give thanks for your listening ears and your listening hearts. For you who carry stories of pain and suffering deep inside, I groan with you for I know how it feels, and I give thanks for your blessed sensitivity because it has the capacity to make you holy. For all that is good and compassionate, kind, merciful and charitable in this world, I give thanks.

May my son be with you forever. May you be vibrant with his memory, alive with his closeness. Death may be at work in us and around us, but so is life. Thanks be to God.