



PATIENCE, PROBABILITY, AND A PANACEA
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 61: 1-4, 8-11; LUKE 1:46B-55
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

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Patience

The Witness¹

Plaintive cries for some
are life's expression
For others there are sweet cadences
that lift the oppression of pain
if only for a time.
For them guttural groan comes
only when death takes a child
or when companions are lost
or place destroyed.

Some voices give truth—
and then the excruciating wait ensues
flashpoints of being wide open
then a womb is the one rhythmic haven
the only place to feel good.
You drink in change
you know how to be a sieve to fluidity
and wait for air to open you another day.

That poem was written by a woman gathering the courage to find her voice—a woman moving out of the silence she had kept about sexual violence and grief in a world that does not want us to speak of our pain, or of the injustice that trivializes our bodies, our relationships, our voices.

So many who find the courage to speak out about these things are told to wait, to quiet themselves, to be patient.

Mary is prone to be an icon of patience—the embodiment of the kind of serene waiting that women have been instructed to embrace for generations.

The visual art of the church has taught us of her patience, of her serene and peaceful patience. The blues of her cloak, the passive look in her eyes, the way she cradles her child, the way she gently waits and watches and ponders.

¹ Marcia Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (WJKP, 2010), 28.

In much of the history of the church, it is not her voice that defines Mary, but the imagination and the agendas of a society that has needed women to be passive, to be secondary, to be quiet carriers of virtue.

The church historically has taught women to wait—to wait for others to make decisions, to wait to grow into women who can bear children in order to live out God’s purpose for us, to wait for others to tell us who we are and what they need from us.

Mary has been a icon of these virtues through time as culture has sculpted different iterations of what the world wants from women, especially from women who are faithful.

Valerie Saiving, one of the mothers of feminist theology, challenged the traditional Christian concept of sin as pride.² The traditional descriptions of sin as pride, as the will to power and prestige are not universal, according to Saiving. She wrote in her groundbreaking 1960 article, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View” that women’s experience of sin has a:

...quality which can never be encompassed by such terms of “pride” and “will-to-power.” [The qualities of sin for women] are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus, dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence... in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.³

Where men in Western culture have traditionally been encouraged to differentiate and to assert themselves, women instead have been encouraged to wait, to receive, to put our needs aside to meet the needs of others. So the invitation toward self-less, self-giving love that traditional Christian theology casts as the antidote for human sin has wielded a sharp edge for women of faith. Such self-giving love can amplify the sin of self-loathing and self-negation for women, instead of redeem and heal both women and men from the ways Western culture can distort who God created us to be.

Mary has been one of the tools the church has employed to teach women how to negate ourselves, how to wait, how to put the needs of others ahead of our own to the point of our own destruction.

But the Mary we encounter here in Luke is different than that Mary. So she deserves our attention. Let us give her space—let us give her our undivided attention.

² Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Apr., 1960), pp. 100-112

³ *Ibid*, 109

It is not her waiting or her passivity or her self-negation that defines Mary here. It is not Joseph's decision to make an honest woman of her that defines her here (that is an emphasis in Matthew, not anywhere to be found in Luke). It is Mary's voice—it is her song—indeed it is her clear sense of self—her sense of how God is using her as a unique self to gestate God for a weary world—that is the defining tenor of Mary's song.

Probability

What are the chances? What laws of probability are shattered when God kindles in Mary the courage to sing of her blessedness?

Breathe in the radical character of this moment—the miracle of Mary's pregnancy is categorically different than Elizabeth's (the story we hear just before our reading today. The pregnancy of an old woman who is the mother of John the Baptist).

Think about it, in Mary's and Elizabeth's day:

- Women were property, like cattle
- Childbearing was where women's worth came from—and men could only know for sure that the children they bore were theirs (and therefore their property, and therefore their heirs), if the woman had not yet been with another man—if she was a young woman, just coming into childbearing age, this was the time to claim her, to mark her as your own.
- Women pregnant outside of wedlock were a source of shame, they threatened chaos to the systems of property and power and social convention.
- Elizabeth's pregnancy supported this patriarchal narrative of women's worth—all those years barren, Elizabeth's shame was miraculously turned to joy as she finally could be perceived as worthy—pregnant with a son.
- But Mary's pregnancy throws a stick of dynamite on that same narrative—her worthiness has been called into question, even destroyed by her pregnancy. Her pregnancy, in the narratives of her world, was not a source of joy, but cause for shame and for loss of worth, maybe even for violence, and most certainly for her life to be emptied of its promise.
- Mary's pregnancy does not support the narrative of patriarchy; it absolutely turns it on its head. God turns a place of utter shame and rejection into a space of favor and redemption—and not just that, this space becomes a portal for God to come closer to this world—a world that can so often feel God-forsaken.

It is in the midst of this radical, chilling, upside down, inside out moment in her life on this earth that Mary decides not to crumble, not to disappear, not to be silenced and rejected. No, Mary decides to sing.

1:46b "My soul magnifies the Lord,

1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

A Panacea

What kind of Mary does the world need today?

The church, Jesus followers, and society through the generations have wanted different Marys.⁴ These institutions, these followers of Jesus, these cultural norms have demanded of Mary a way to embody the ideal woman of faith. Mary, the mother of God, blessed among women, the one who hears our prayers and knows our needs. Mary, the pure and the meek, the lowly and the obedient.

It can be hard to know how to connect to Mary when she is cloaked in all these expectations, in all these appropriations of her body and her voice and her purpose.

What kind of Mary does the world need today? A virgin mother, alone of all her sex? A meek and mild and obedient wife? A disciple? An idea? An ideal of faith?

Colm Toibín (“*Tobeen*”) Irish Author, wrote *The Testament of Mary*, a novel and a Tony nominated play that was also protested by groups in the Catholic Church in the United States just a few years ago.⁵

Toibín’s is the story of Mary years after Jesus’ death, in exile, alone, and anything but serene. She is angry; she is ready for her truth to come out about her son. The novel and Broadway play circle around Mary being asked by some of Jesus’ disciples (who

⁴ “Mother, Empress, Virgin, Faith: ‘Picturing Mary’ And Her Many Meanings,” NPR, December 24, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/12/24/372731460/mother-empress-virgin-faith-picturing-mary-and-her-many-meanings>

⁵ Colm Tóibín: Why I humanised Mary the mother of God, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajM4NxiRA6Y&t=444s>

she feel contempt toward for what they encouraged in her son) to tell them what she remembers. And she remembers things very differently than they do.

Toibín's is an imaginary of Mary in her later years—ready to be heard, but also struggling with her guilt and her grief and her pain about the life of her son, this son that she brought into the world, this son that she wishes she could have protected, this son who she wanted to make other choices, this son who has brought her anguish.

What would Mary say, Toibín imagines, if she had nothing to lose.

Toibín's Mary is fearless, relentless, and defiant all these years after the nativity, all these years after the crucifixion. In Toibín's imagination, we see a Mary trapped by the men who have written her life story, a story she doesn't recognize, a story she knows not as a story, but as her life.

Mary tells the truth Toibín imagined she would tell. "I have developed a hunger for catastrophe," Toibín's Mary says as she refuses to be consoled by the assertions of the disciples who tell her that Jesus saved the world. Mary had wanted him to come home with her. She hadn't wanted him to turn the water into wine at the wedding of Cana, she had asked him to flee with her from the dangers that were growing as the crowds around him grew.

Her chilling words to the disciples when they insisted that his pain and suffering, his violent death were not in vain: "It was not worth it."

All Mary wants in Toibín's imagination is: "to confine dreams to the night-time and living to the daytime, and to live' in full recognition of the difference between the two."

What kind of Mary does the world need today?

My guess is we need Mary to not just speak to women, but to speak to all of us—especially those of us who want our lives to be a witness to why all that Jesus did for us was worth it. Perhaps we need Mary to hold her son's followers in contempt. What about the way we are living and speaking into the world today as his followers makes it all worth it?

Mary's song back then when an unknown future lay ahead spoke to us about the course God had set for history—a course of justice, a course of raising up the lowly and scattering the proud, a course of feeding the hungry and dethroning those who abuse their power.

Some voices speak truth,

and then the excruciating wait ensues⁶

All these years later, a mother's grief might just be what wakes us up to how faith waits—not serenely, not meekly, not passively or with cowardice. Faith waits like Mary did—with confidence that God can turn the places where we have everything to lose, into a panacea—a remedy for what truly ails us all—not just some of us, but all that lives and breaths—that God is calling you and me to shed the way the world distorts our lives and our life together, that God gestates in our worst shame and guilt to knit together a healed world.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me... God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners... to comfort all who mourn; ... to give [us] a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.⁷

May it be with us, brothers and sisters, may it be so with every one of us.

Thanks be to God.

⁶ Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 28.

⁷ Isaiah 61:1-3