

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

14 August 2022 – FEAST OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN (*transferred*)

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Sermon: "*Magnify the Lord!*"

Isaiah 61:10-11 (God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up everywhere)
Psalm 34:1-9 (Praise to the Lord for His salvation and provision)
Galatians 4:4-7 (At the right time, God sent His Son, born through a woman)
St. Luke 1:46-55 (St. Mary praises God in "The Magnificat")

On August 15th, the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions celebrate the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For Orthodox Christians, this is the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God—a remembrance of Mary, her earthly travail having ended, falling into a sleep-like state in the eternal arms of God. For Roman Catholics, this is the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin—the commemoration of Mary being taken, body and soul, into God's timeless presence as Queen of Heaven. Anglicans have been more reticent about the specifics of both observances. Since there is no direct scriptural account of the end of Mary's life, we celebrate a more generic Feast of Saint Mary the Virgin. The Orthodox Feast of the Dormition and the Roman Catholic Feast of the Assumption are often misunderstood as meaning that Mary did not really die; she was simply assumed into heaven or fell asleep. In fact, neither Feast denies the actual human death of Mary.

Rather, they point to her death as one of victory. Whether she was assumed directly into heaven or simply fell asleep comfortably for all eternity at the conclusion of her earthly life—one filled with unspeakable joys *and* horrific pain—Mary now shares Christ's victory over sin and death, having attained her ultimate rest and reigning in heaven.

All three traditions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican—can offer us insight into Mary's importance for our Christian faith. For all believers, Mary's place is central in the story of our salvation from sin. So let's start with sin. What does Mary show us about our human nature and the forgiveness of sin which God freely offers to every person?

When the Bible first mentions sin in the book of Genesis, its effect is immediate and obvious. In Chapter 3, we read the foundational story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from His presence among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." Adam and Eve hid themselves because the first result of sin is a desire to hide, particularly from God.

Now, the fact that we are all sinners does not imply that every one of us is morally reprehensible. Even so, all sin causes the fracturing of both our human nature and the relationship God intended for us to have with Him. It's about our deep-seated tendency in small, everyday ways to think ill of others; to hold grudges; and to be self-centered, self-concerned, and self-important. Sin closes us in on ourselves. It makes us ashamed of the dark places in our hearts. It hampers our openness to others and to God, as we become more and more focused on ourselves. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God (as if such thing were possible), and, turned in on themselves, harbored fear—the fear of shame, the fear of truth, the fear of God. None of us is wholly free from the inclination to hide some aspect of ourselves. We all have dark corners of our lives that we never want others to see and which we often pretend are not there.

Sinful humanity closes in on itself and away from God. Following the account of the origin of sin in Genesis, the Old Testament chronicles God's longing to find a way into the closed heart of humanity, especially through the prophets. In the end, humanity is so shut-off from God that He must find a way in by taking human nature unto Himself, entering the heart of humanity through the Incarnation. That route was through the innocence and faithful obedience of the Virgin Mary.

What is unique and special about Mary is that sin had not closed her in on herself. In her simplicity and humility, from the very beginning of her existence, Mary was open to God. So the Angel Gabriel greets Mary and tells her that, “full of grace,” she will bear a Son who is to be “Emmanuel”—God with us. She replies: “Be it unto me according to your word.” Mary’s faith is such that, without fear, without being closed in on herself, she is capable of receiving God’s Word and will. God found a way into the closed human heart, starting with Mary’s.

Later in St. Luke’s Gospel, Mary’s response, so filled with joy and hope, is the song we heard this morning, and which Episcopalians recite during Evening Prayer, *The Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

Notice that Mary’s soul ‘magnifies’ the Lord. To ‘magnify’ means to make bigger. How could a mere creature ‘magnify’ God? What this means is that Mary does not draw attention to herself, but to God. She magnifies God in the sense that she points us to God’s saving love. In doing so, God also magnifies her: He does great things for His lowly servant. Her humanity is magnified, made fuller, more radiant, and more beautiful. Like her, when we glorify God instead of ourselves, being open to His love, *our* humanity is healed, restored, and made fully what God intends it to be.

But this is not a fairy tale. In *The Magnificat*, Mary proclaims that God will bring down the mighty from their self-appointed thrones, the proud will be scattered while the hungry are filled with good things, and the rich will be sent away empty. She is acutely aware of the agony and struggle humankind must endure on earth as we await the coming kingdom her Son will bring.

And we should never forget the words spoken by the prophet Simeon as Mary brings Jesus to the Temple for His dedication: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-45). Simeon foretold that Mary would later witness the brutal torture and heartbreaking crucifixion of her own beloved Son.

Despite all the anxieties that likely beset her young life as she dealt with Joseph’s response to her pregnancy; was required to travel for the census when she was nine months along; and then later, was forced to flee to Egypt to escape King Herod’s murderous rampage, Mary did not close in on herself but remained open to God’s loving purposes. She is, as the Angel Gabriel said, “full of grace.” And that grace of God continued to flow through her, as she raised Jesus and followed Him in His ministry around Galilee. Fear did not overtake her. What persisted in Mary was a deep and open trust in God which meant that, at her death, every sacrifice she had to endure was finally over. Even death was defeated.

So, thinking back to the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Feasts, Mary can fall asleep in the deep peace of almighty God or be assumed into heaven, body and soul. The Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican celebrations of this great feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary have a common focus after all: Mary, the first of the redeemed, whose humanity, body and soul, are whole and luminous because she is filled with God’s grace and magnifies the Lord, now dwells in eternal light and peace in the presence of God and the risen Christ.

And to us sinners, closed in on ourselves, hiding as Adam and Eve did, Mary shows a humanity that is fully open to God because it is fully open to Jesus Christ. When we open our hearts more and more to God’s loving purposes in Christ, we follow the example of His Blessed Mother, and we encounter the healing truth of God’s immense love. In magnifying the Lord, we become more fully human, and more able to be comfortable and at peace in the presence of God.¹

In venerating Mary for her faithfulness, humility, strength, and obedience, some may have a concern that we go too far and ‘worship’ her. But in a sermon preached 14 years after his 95 Theses, Martin Luther—the founder of the Protestant Reformation—said: [Mary is the] “highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ. . . . She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough. Still honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures.”²

So, how can we as Anglicans honor Mary in a way that points us to Christ and is anchored in the Holy Scriptures? I can think of at least two important ways:

First, we need to recognize the crucial role she plays in God’s work of salvation. In choosing Mary to serve as the God-bearer, God signals that He is indeed making all things new, first and foremost through the birth of Jesus Christ, the promised offspring who will crush the devil’s head (see Genesis 3:15). But also in the undoing of Eve’s disobedience through Mary’s gracious response: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary’s grace-filled “Yes” to God’s purposes makes it possible for God to undo the calamitous “No” through which Eve plunged the human family into sin and death. This was ultimately accomplished when Jesus Christ, on our behalf, said “Yes” to God the Father in bearing the consequences of our sin upon the Cross.

Second, we can see Mary’s life as a pattern for our Christian faith—not only in her “Yes” to God’s Word and will, but also in that she *delighted in*, and *abided in*, God’s ways. Mary reminds us that all Christians are called not only to say “Yes” to God’s Word and obey His will, but also to treasure, to delight in, and to ponder the depths of God’s ways.³

Let us, along with Mary, magnify the Lord through our praise and worship, adoration and thanksgiving, giving glory to the one God who, with the Holy Spirit and the Son, lives and reigns forever and ever! *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. Simon Oliver, “The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” [DurhamCathedral.org](https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/worship-music/regular-services/sermon-archive/the-feast-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary/), 15 August 2019 <<https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/worship-music/regular-services/sermon-archive/the-feast-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary/>> 8 August 2022. Used with permission.

² Dave Armstrong, “Martin Luther’s Devotion to Mary,” [CatholicCulture.org](https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=788), 24 April 2003 <<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=788>> 10 August 2022.

³ Adapt. St. John’s Canton, “For All the Saints: The Virgin Mary, Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” [StJohnsCanton.org](https://www.stjohnscanton.org/for-all-the-saints-the-virgin-mary-mother-of-our-lord-jesus-christ-august-15th/), 13 August 2019 <<https://www.stjohnscanton.org/for-all-the-saints-the-virgin-mary-mother-of-our-lord-jesus-christ-august-15th/>> 9 August 2022. Used with permission.