

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday May 10, 2009

Acts 1:12-14

This past Thursday, in our Women of the Bible class, we looked at the infamous ‘Proverbs 31 Woman’. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls this passage “Ode to a Capable Wife”. It is important to note that this is a fictitious woman—a mother’s description of the ideal wife for her son. As we studied this imaginary woman, we felt that she was *too* perfect *and* too submissive to be real. Listen to her resume, and see what you think....

NRSV PROVERBS 31:10 ODE TO A CAPABLE WIFE

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.

**Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
 and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
 and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her happy;
 her husband too, and he praises her:
“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
 but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
 and let her works praise her in the city gates.**

So.....this is the woman that a biblical mother wanted for her son—no wonder—he would clearly have been pampered and spoiled with all of her wondrous traits and efforts! By human standards, or at least by the standards of some human beings, this describes the perfect woman.

How interesting it is, then, that when God needed a woman to take on the most important task of all—that of bearing and raising God’s son, Jesus, God chose someone who was not perfect, certainly not wealthy, and too young to be very accomplished at anything. For this most challenging role, God chose a poor, unmarried, backwoods teenager by the name of Mary.

While there are many, many differences between the paragon of Proverbs 31 and Jesus’ mother Mary, the most obvious is that Mary was for real—she would be confronted by unimaginable life challenges, and she would meet each one with grace and faith.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a most appropriate role model for us to contemplate on Mothers' Day morning. For it is Mary, not some bigger-than-life ideal, who can show us what it means to live in faith and obedience to God, not only as a parent, but in all of life's joys and sorrows.

It is most common for us to get to know Mary in bits and pieces—her introduction to motherhood at Christmastime, a glimpse of her life here and there during Jesus' childhood, her sorrowful presence at the crucifixion. Today, I thought it might be interesting to consider Mary's life from an overall perspective, exploring the ways that she responded to the various challenges, joys, and sorrows during her life.

And the story, as we know it, begins with the announcement of her pregnancy. She didn't find out in the usual way. No, this unmarried teen from the tiny village of Nazareth had a visit from an angel to let her know that she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit. A child who would be the Son of God.

Do you recall Mary's response?

She said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

At a time when Mary might have reacted with fear, anger, or disbelief, the young woman whom God had chosen responded serenely, with faith, in obedience to God.

When we are surprised or even blindsided by a life-changing challenge, we would do well to think of Mary, and to respond with grace, as she did.

We may also learn from Mary's next actions.....having heard the news of her unusual pregnancy, Mary set out for the hill country to visit her older cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth had long been Mary's friend and mentor, so it was natural for Mary to turn to her for support and encouragement.

Elizabeth's response was so positive, so faith-filled, that Mary spoke a beautiful song of praise to God, which began, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant."

In the face of challenges which will alter our circumstances or even the rest of our entire lives, we would be wise to follow Mary's lead, seeking out one or more trusted friends to encourage us as we journey, and rejoicing in our blessings.

Mary gave birth to Jesus far from home, in a stable, visited by shepherds and magi. A great star shone and angels sang and praised God for the child. And scripture tells us that, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." When our lives are chaotic with events that are just too much to take in, we can learn, once again, from Mary's example.

Mary was a woman of reflection and prayer. She listened and watched and remembered, so that in quieter times she could truly consider, wonder, and give thanks for all that had taken place.

What a beautiful example for us—our lives move so quickly, from one event to the other, some sad, some joyful, some just bewildering—why not follow Mary’s lead, learning to absorb, to treasure, and to ponder events over time?

Within days of Jesus’ birth, Mary would have more to ponder—the chilling words of Simon, when Jesus was presented in the temple. While praising God and blessing the child, Simon said to Mary, “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.”

Such words must have shaken Mary to the core, yet she proceeded with her customary serenity, even as the young family was forced to flee into Egypt to protect their infant son from Herod’s hatred. It can’t have been easy for Mary, she who had traveled on a donkey so late in her pregnancy, to be on the road again with a tiny child, with no specific destination ahead.

But hardship didn't stop Mary. She was nothing if not courageous and strong, ready to do whatever had to be done. We can learn from Mary....

When we are just bouncing back from a series of trials, only to have yet another major obstacle appear in our way, like Mary did, we can keep on moving forward in faith, one step at a time, doing what needs to be done. She was a wise woman, that Mary, clearly God had chosen well.

Jesus was born both fully human and fully divine. *Mary* was fully *human*. And that was evident in the glimpses the scriptures give us of trying moments in her life as a mother.

Remember the time she and Joseph and twelve-year-old Jesus had traveled to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the Passover? On the return trip, Mary and Joseph and a large group of relatives and friends had gone some distance before discovering that Jesus was not among them. Panic ensued, and the distraught parents spent three days searching for their son before finding him in the temple, talking with the elders.

Mary said to her son, "Child, why have you treated us like this?

Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great

anxiety." In this, she sounds like any other worried mom. Page 6

The scriptures tell us that Mary and Joseph did not understand Jesus' explanation, his needing 'to be in his father's house', but that, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart."

The gospel according to John gives us a glimpse of Mary at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is believed that Mary was a widow by this time, left alone to raise Jesus' younger brothers and sisters. Perhaps it was difficult for her to realize that Jesus was ready to head out on his own. Even at age thirty, this man was still her beloved baby, her firstborn—and like all mothers do, Mary had to learn to let go.

In a paradoxical way, Mary sets out to launch Jesus' ministry, while at the same time treating him as if he were still Mary's little boy.

While together at a wedding in Cana, the wine ran out. Mary urged Jesus to do something about it. When he declined, she spoke to the servants, directing them to do whatever Jesus told them to.

And so, whether he thought it was time or not, Jesus began his public ministry at the behest of his mother!

How utterly normal Mary was! Perhaps on that day she embarrassed her son, she had certainly spoken out of turn. But she did so out of love for and pride in her son. Her intentions were good.

We can learn from Mary’s example, even in this. As parents, family members, friends, whatever the relationship—we are all going to make mistakes in our words or our actions—but if our underlying intent is clearly one of love, then wrongs will be righted, and relationships will not be weakened.

There were times, also, when Jesus’ behavior seemed out-of-line when it came to his mother. One day, when he was teaching amidst a large crowd, Jesus’ mother and brothers came to him, but could not approach him because of the multitude of people. When someone alerted him to his family’s presence, Jesus replied, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” That would have been a shock to Mary, I think, something she would have had to ponder for some time.

Eventually, I believe, she would have come to understand, as a woman of faith, that Jesus belonged to God and to all of God’s children, not just to her and her children. His ministry was widespread and it would be timeless.

Could Mary learn to share her son with all the world?

She could, and she would, but first she would experience the deepest pain a parent can know—the death of a child.

Mary was present at the foot of the cross, as her son was tortured and mocked.

In those traumatic moments, Jesus showed her that she was still his beloved mother—not just another face in the crowd. He looked at her, and then at one of his dear disciples, and he offered them to one another—as mother and son.

In that moment, Mary would have known that she had fulfilled her promise to God, that she had raised him well. Even while suffering terrible pain, Jesus was considerate and loving toward his mother, giving her what comfort he could with some of his very last breaths.

Hopefully, we will not have to witness the deaths of any of our children, yet we can still learn from Mary as she experienced this painful event. Mary had come to understand, as Jesus had grown into a fulfillment of the prophecies, that he was a gift from God, and that his life was in God’s hands.

Where did she find the courage to stand at the foot of the cross and witness his unspeakable pain? Through her unshakable faith in God, the God who had created Jesus, sent Jesus to live in that time and place, and who would receive Jesus back into heaven, Mary was able to choose trust over fear, love over hatred, hope over despair.

When we, or our loved ones, face the most painful and challenging of circumstances, may we, like Mary, respond in faith, with trust, hope, and love in the grace and power of Almighty God.

The scriptures offer us one last glimpse into Mary's life. It takes place just following Jesus' ascension into heaven, and is described in today's scripture passage from Acts. Listen, now, for God's word for you..... Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

We met Mary just before Jesus entered her life, and now we encounter her one last time, just after he has physically departed into heaven.

As a woman, he had changed her life—he was her firstborn son, and raising him had been a joy and a challenge, as with any other child.

But, as a woman of faith, he had changed her life as well—for he was, first and foremost, the Son of God. As a part of her most unique journey as the mother of this child, Mary learned to rely on God's strength as she slowly released her son into his ministry and into God's care.

And, when he was gone, Mary continued along the path of faith in Christ, gathering with the disciples and other women for prayer.

For, while Mary had completed her task of raising God's son, she was still called to continue in practicing and spreading the faith.

Mary's journey through motherhood had been dramatic, tumultuous, heart-warming, painful, and joyful as well. Drained and grieving, following her son's crucifixion and death, she would have been justified in taking some time away. But, yet again, Mary chose the way of courage, faith, and obedience. For she believed deeply in the God who had sent her son, and who her son had been—and continued to be. Mary was not about to give up now....

She had been touched by the living God, borne God's son, Jesus Christ, and now she would be filled with the breath of the Holy Spirit, carrying on the ministry that had begun in her at the words of an unexpected angel.

On this Mothers' Day, as we remember, honor, and give thanks for all the mothers who have touched our lives, let us give special thanks to God for Mary, and let us strive to live as she did—responding to the joys and the sorrows in our lives with serenity, faith, courage, obedience, and grace.

Amen.