

*The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

December 9, 2018 – Second Sunday of Advent

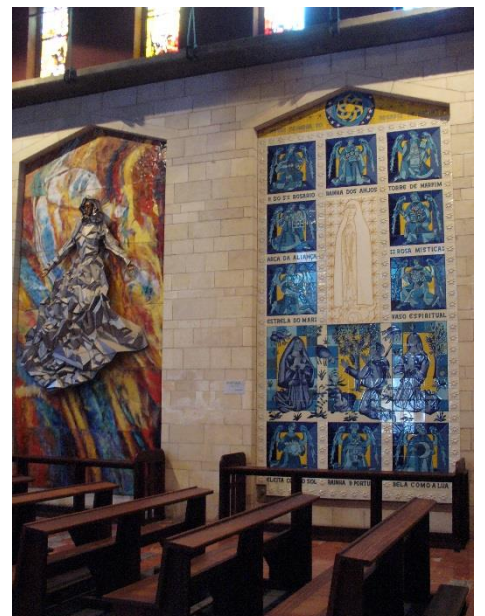
### **Hail, Mary, Full of Grace**

*“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.  
And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,  
and you will name him Jesus.” – Luke 1: 26-38*

Several years ago, Therese and I travelled to Israel with a group of friends, where we visited many churches, maybe too many churches, so many that one of our friends trotted out an acronym: ABC for “Another Bloody Church.” It works equally well, in some parts of the world for “Another Bloody Castle.” We visited churches that were ancient and churches that were modern, both tiny and



enormous. (show slide 1) To my surprise, the largest church we saw, one of the most modern, and possibly the most beautiful, was not devoted to the worship of Jesus, but was dedicated to the adoration of Mary. It was in Nazareth, reputed to be Mary’s home, and the site where the Angel announced to Mary that she had been chosen to give birth to the Saviour. So, it was called the church of the Annunciation, which is the traditional name for the story we just read. (show slide 2) The church was filled with artwork celebrating the Madonna from all over the world, massive murals in all kinds of media, an amazing testament to a woman who is central to the spirituality of millions of Christians, but whom most Protestants mention only in passing at Christmas.



Mary's role in the biblical record is not a large one. She has an important role in Jesus' birth of course, appears briefly in annoyance when the teenage Jesus goes missing, but almost disappears during his teaching ministry, appearing only a few times as a spokesperson for a disbelieving family who are embarrassed by his ministry, and worried about him because they think he is out of his mind. In the gospel according to John, at a wedding in Cana of Galilee she persuades Jesus to turn water into wine, and then she appears again in John's account of the crucifixion.

In the short story we heard today, we heard of her encounter with the angel Gabriel, and her willingness to accept the burden of being Jesus' mother. That burden is not spelled out very clearly in the story, but it certainly included the physical demands of pregnancy and childbirth, the social burden of a birth that was considered scandalous, and later on, the agonizing grief of witnessing her son's violent and ignominious end. We need not read this story as an historical account in order to appreciate the dynamics of this challenging invitation, and Mary's willingness to accept this burden. As a result of her acceptance, Mary came to be seen as a model of faith, particularly a model of female faith. As a result of the story of her successful intervention with Jesus at the wedding in Cana, people started praying to her, so that she would persuade Jesus to do a miracle in their lives. As a result of her accompanying Jesus at the end, she came to be seen as one who understood suffering, a companion in times of suffering and sorrow.

Beyond that, as Christianity spread into cultures where there had been significant female goddesses, Mary absorbed some of the characteristics of those female deities. (show slide 3) Perhaps influenced by stories of the virgin goddess of wisdom, Athena in Greece and Minerva in Rome, she began to be seen as more than just a character in an ancient story but something much more. By the fourth century, she is described as the "Mother of God," the "Queen of Heaven," and the "Universal Mother." She was no longer a teenaged



Jewish Peasant girl, but the symbol of female life, female struggle and female strength. In Islam, Mary is treated with great respect. There is a whole chapter (Surah) about her in the Koran, for example, and in Egypt, both Christians and Muslims worship at the sites where she is reputed to have stopped during the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt.

The veneration of Mary sometimes takes very surprising forms. Millions of pilgrims travel to places where the Virgin Mother has reported to have revealed herself: Lourdes in France, to Mexico City, to Poland and Rwanda, just to name a few. For a long time, I have paid little attention to those reported apparitions, placing them in the same category as accounts of Elvis sightings and UFO abductions. I am a Protestant, and Protestants have long resisted inflated claims about Mary. But recently I have begun to wonder if there is another way of looking at this phenomena. Mary exerts a strong pull on the human imagination. And it seems to me that we can respect how she inspires people even when we are skeptical about the precise claims that are made. It is significant, I think that most of these apparitions are to impoverished girls and women who see Mary as a companion in struggle, one of the oppressed to whom God is bringing salvation.

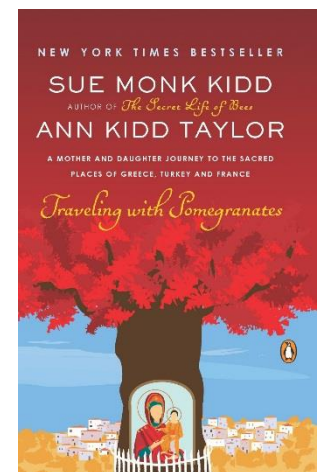
The author Sue Monk Kidd grew up in a Baptist Church in Georgia and says that she was almost unaware of Mary, except for one year when the outdoor nativity scene caught on fire, and the minister dashed in to save the baby Jesus, but left the figure of Mary behind to burn. That story expresses perfectly how expendable Mary is in the Protestant world. She was not considered worth saving! When Kidd did pay more attention to Mary, she found herself repulsed by a Mary who was often portrayed as so docile and so submissive that she seemed more worthy of pity than adoration. Over the years, Kidd writes, she had left traditional religion behind and her understanding of God had evolved into increasingly remote abstractions, a God so vast, amorphous, mysterious and holy that it had become ungraspable. But over time, she had become aware of a deep hunger for greater intimacy with God. But it was hard to develop a sense of intimacy with an abstraction.

But then she visited Athens. In Athens, which shares its name with the Greek goddess Athena, the Greek Orthodox Cathedral is dedicated to the Annunciation to Mary. I don't think that is any accident. Some of the characteristics of the ancient Greek goddess Athena seem to have attached themselves to the Mother of Jesus.

In the cathedral in Athens, she is drawn to an icon of the Virgin Mary (Show slide 4) , who is not at all docile, but stares out of the icon with “uncompromising authority.”<sup>1</sup> She comes to realize that “The human soul needs a divine mother, a feminine aspect to balance out the masculinity of [the heavenly Father]...”<sup>2</sup>



Sue writes about that visit in a book she wrote with her daughter Ann. (Show slide 5) The book is a memoir of how the two travelled to many sites where the Greek goddesses and the Virgin Mary are venerated. They tell stories about how reflecting on the icons and art works depicting the divine female inspire them. Ann, for example, the daughter, tells of a particularly difficult time in her life, when she was a young adult. She had been dating and living with a young man for several years and fully expected that she would marry him one day, but suddenly and unexpectedly, he broke up with her. She sunk into a depression, but found herself pondering the symbolism of the virgin in Greek mythology and Christian tradition. She realized that her identity had become focused around her boyfriend in an unhealthy way, and she needed to recover a sense of herself as an individual. She realized that the virginity of Athena, and later Mary, had little to do with an intact hymen, and everything to do with independence, autonomy and strength. The Virgin was a woman who did not need a man to complete her. The Virgin was complete by herself, and able to be fully human, fully alive, regardless of her relationship status. Ann felt empowered by the Virgin,



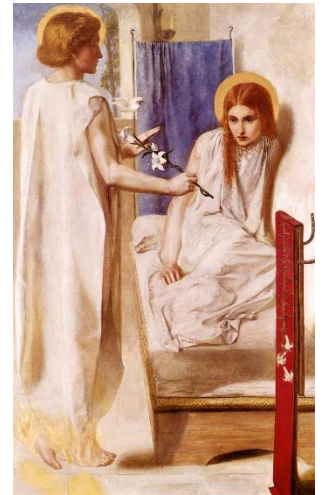
<sup>1</sup> Travelling with Pomegranates, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Travelling with Pomegranates, p. 48.



and eventually took that strength into a new and healthier relationship.

Sue, the mother in the mother-daughter team, tells of another inspiration. She was a writer, but had always written non-fiction, because she found fiction terrifying. But there was a time when she began having dreams about Mary and being drawn to art work depicting Mary. One painting in particular, Rossetti's depiction of the Annunciation, (Show slide 6) caught her attention. You can tell who the angel is because he has flames around his head and licking at his feet. He is standing beside Mary's bed holding out a long white lily. Mary is cowering against the wall, looking terrified. But she is not looking at the angel as if she is afraid of him. Her attention seems to be directed inward, as if her terror is at the realization of what she is being called to. Kidd stared at the painting for twenty full minutes; she writes "it struck a raw nerve inside that had to do with unfulfilled creative desires." It had "triggered a longing in me that was maternal and aching... [Writing fiction] felt beyond my power and courage, the sort of thing that made me shrink against my pillow at night... Mary's annunciation became a metaphor for my own creative potential."<sup>3</sup> The story of Mary's call to be a mother, she realized, was not just about the birth of one child, however important that child was. It was about her own deep inner summons to bring forth something new, to give birth to ideas, to her own creativity, to a new conception of herself, to stories that could evoke others deepest calling. (p. 147) Mary, she concludes, had become a way to meet the divinity within herself. (p. 247) In response to that summons, and to dreams and insights that occurred over the next few years, Sue Monk Kidd wrote a novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, that became one of the best selling novels of this generation. It is a beautiful novel, and I was not surprised to learn that it had emerged out of a sense of a diving calling.



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<sup>3</sup> Travelling with Pomegranates, p. 50.

During this Advent season, I love singing an Advent hymn called “O Ancient Love.” The chorus to that hymn is “O Living Love, within our hearts be born/borne.” That chorus is a prayer, a prayer that love will come to birth in me and in you. The first line has the word “born,” spelled B-O-R-N, which means that we want the living love to come to birth in our lives. But the second line adds an E to the born, making it B-O-R-N-E, which has a different meaning, the prayer that the living love will be carried in our lives, like a pregnant woman carries a baby, before it comes to birth. Both of those prayers are inspired by the story of Mary, who bore Jesus, and then gave birth to him. This morning, I invite you to spend some time meditating and pondering the figure of Mary, asking what she might be saying to you. This is an invitation to identify with Mary, whether you are a male or a female, to realize that like her, we may have a role to play in God’s plan to bring his Kingdom to birth. And perhaps, the stories of this season can become for you too, a way to meet the divine within yourself. Perhaps, one day, you too may catch a glimpse of something which might come to birth, and you will be terrified. Perhaps terror is a sign that an angel is at hand, gently inviting you to give birth to the new thing that God is doing in you. Amen.