

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

I love Mary Sunday! And this sermon wants to be twice as long as it is. I suppose I could talk about her more frequently than I do, but her son so often overshadows her in the texts we read . . . but not today. Without a lot of scriptural information about who she was, our imaginations and tradition have developed around her memory. We know well the archetypal Mary who is the ideal woman of faith, we have an image of her in our minds, see statues of her in cathedrals and paintings in galleries, looking serene and pure, often with her gaze in the direction of the baby Jesus. A friend of mine has images of the Madonna and Child in her home and when her son was preschool age he used to point to them and say, "mamma, that's me and you." Yes, honey, that's right." As Christianity grew over the centuries, the tradition also developed around Mary, imbuing her with the qualities of fertility goddess that had long been worshiped in the Mediteranian. In fact, as Christianity gained traction, statues of virgin

goddesses, like Isis and Diana were eventually rededicated to Mary. While many of us have little investment in the theology of Mary as a literal virgin mother, the archetype of life-giver still resonates: "she was a virgin in the same way we still talk of virgin forest or virgin territory. She teemed with life. Untamed, untouchable, uncontrollable, she was the wild, fecund source of creation. Soil, rain, sun; seed, harvest, sustenance; man, woman, child – every form of life began with her."¹ She brings forth a particular manifestation of Christ in the person of Jesus.

Underneath the archetype we all know, there must be a real person . . . if we can search back for the historical Jesus, there must indeed be a historical Mary . . . or Maryam, as she most certainly was called. What can we know about her? What can we imagine about her? Author, Lesley Hazleton uses history and anthropology, among other things to boldly imagine Maryam in her context . . . first century Nazareth . . . a poor village near the Sea of Galilee. What if Maryam had a grandmother who was a healer, who taught her about herbs, how to set broken bones, and assist in childbirth. There was a

¹ Hazleton, 116

healer in every village, and these women were the authority at the time on medicine and healing. What if Maryam, from the time she was very young, accompanied her grandmother to house calls and learned how to harvest, dry and prepare her own herbs. Indeed Maryam was a poor peasant girl, but that doesn't necessarily mean she was lacking in wisdom. "She would raise a child who would become a revered healer in his time . . . [and] a divine being after his death"² . . . what if she was more than just another peasant girl out with the flocks?

This Maryam would have brought into pregnancy more than youth; by the age of 13, she would have extensive knowledge and experience of health, healing, and childbirth, as well as the emotional grounding that comes with education and accompanying people through the stuff of life.

Maryam would have participated in many births and seen with her own eyes the huge risks of pregnancy and childbirth; in her culture there is no celebration of new life until 40 days after delivery, when the child has survived those first few weeks of life. Because of the vulnerability associated with

bringing life into the world, in those days it was woven with mystery and divine participation. Hazleton writes: "Maryam knew there was no explaining why conception occurred at one time and not another, or why one delivery might be easy and another difficult. And she knew that beyond these was a greater mystery: the sense of awe and wonder she felt anew each time a child emerged into the light."³

Perhaps it was the same feeling of awe and wonder as a visitation from one of God's own messengers. Was it a voice she heard or a light she saw? Was it a presence or an unmistakable knowing? . . . knowing that she is blessed, that she has had an encounter with the holy, and God has blessed her to give life to a healthy baby to raise and nurture . . . for Maryam this would have truly been a miraculous and incredible gift.

In the story we have in scripture, Maryam says yes to the mystery, yes to life, yes to being the mother of someone with a specific and consequential future. Perhaps she was the one who steeped Jesus in the art of healing at a young age. Perhaps it was Maryam who not only gave Jesus life

² Hazleton, 80.

³ Hazleton 129

through God's blessing, but gave Jesus the early formation and foundation for his calling and ministry . . . it's a wonderful thing, just to wonder.