Sermon St. Mary the Virgin
(Isaiah 7:5-10; Ps. 132:6-10; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55)

During the 4th century CE, Christianity became officially recognized, existing, finally from a place of peace within Roman Civilization. As the persecutions ebbed and became the “good old days,” actually, “the bad old days” I guess, Christians rediscovered a favorite pastime: arguing about theology.

It was then that the meaning of Mary jumped to near the front of the queue. Making sense of Mary was necessary on several levels. First, she was so greatly loved and revered that the pressure to worship her as the divine feminine was very strong; what should be done with that pressure?

Secondly, there was discernable in the Scriptures an arc from Adam’s sin through the Patriarchs, Moses, the Kings culminating in Jesus as the new and triumphant Adam

there was also a discernable arc from Eve’s fall through the barrenness and almost always miraculous pregnancies of Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, including the young woman of our first reading, that’s how the Hebrew has it; the Greek translation of that Hebrew has “virgin.” That matri-arch (please forgive the pun) reaches it’s fulfillment in Mary, the new and triumphant Eve.

The New Testament knew what to do with the story line of Jesus but had not really filled out this other plotline that seemed to beg for an explanation.

As the early church adored and revered Mary and as they thought about the biblical plot they came to realize that Mary could help illumine who God was, the Holy Trinity, from the other end, as it were, beginning with humans, rather than God.

Protestants protest as the name suggests, “that’s what Jesus is for!” Yes that’s true! Mary is not the feminine equivalent of Jesus, that is surely right, but over the last 150 mainline Protestants have moved towards a more ecumenical, a more Catholic understanding of Mary without, they hope, are some of the perceived excesses Marian devotion.

The great wonder is that Mary had been touched by grace as to touch the very life of God and in that showed us what a life pleasing to God might look like. The readings get us some of the way there.

The passage from Isaiah was a prophecy, most likely about (one of?) Ahaz’s young wife, or if truly a virgin, Ahaz’s wife to be. Like Mary before her calling, she’s nameless and faceless.

This nameless woman, Ahaz’s wife, will give birth, her son will be named Immanuel (God with us) and it will be a sign, Isaiah says, of God’s presence protecting Jerusalem and Judah from the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Aram.

Ahaz was tempted to call in Assyria, the reigning superpower, but once you call in that chip you’re beholden to Assyria from that time on: don’t do it says Isaiah, rely on God’s provision instead and you will truly be free!

New life comes when God’s people receive don’t panic when threatened, but trust that God’s provision will be their at the appointed time. This isn’t easy to do and Ahaz doesn’t take the sign, but relies on Assyria instead which serves as a pretext for Assyria to invade.

We live by our senses and panic when we are threatened. What Mary calls us to remember is that the provision of God is closer than we think; God is active in human history, waiting, calling even, for willing participants.

When we turn to Galatians, probably Paul’s first letter, we find Mary, still not named, we note, but indispensable for Paul’s point about Christ’s true humanity.

It’s easy to forget that in the early church the pressure in the debates about Christ’s nature wasn’t about his divinity but about his true humanity. His deeds, his mighty resurrection seemed godlike and so many were saying that he just “appeared to be human.”

What Paul is stressing is that Christ “is born of a woman,” “in the fullness of time.” In other words God has a plan and purpose and God’s hand is detectable in human history.

It’s not detectable in humanity as lump but with people. God’s choice of moment and of mother is anything but random.

God acts in history; God acts for the sake of people. And God works through particular people at particular times. In Mary we see that God is a God of the ordinary person, again, something we can take for granted in a democracy but a radical and revolutionary idea in the ancient world.

And, if we’re honest, probably something we struggle to trust when the chips are down, when we’re hurting, alone, sick, fired from a job or just been told we don’t measure up in some way.

If we’re there we may be ready for the gospel reading, Mary’s Magnificat, her beautiful, hopeful, radical, world-shaping poetry of praise.

It’s amazing that as we listen to it read and as we get ready to sing it as an offertory how quickly Mary pivots from herself as a recipient of Grace to proclaiming God. Indeed even what she says about herself she says in terms of God, “The Mighty One has done great things for me!”

God has shown…God has brought down…God has filled…God has helped. The truth about Mary is that she’s all about God. She points to God, indeed in the East this is one of her names: the one who points the way.

There is surely something utterly unique to her as the one who bore Christ but surely there is something for all of us in her basic position. Pointing the way to God by highlighting how God is active in the world and in human persons.

As we exercise faith, as we point the way to life, we find what Mary found: that we are named and called, that God has a plan and that we become someone in and through God works if we dare to trust that it is so.

What we find in human history, over and over again, is that Mary’s message, through the Son of God whom she bore, is constantly being rediscovered; is constantly challenging us to join in the actions of God’s naming and liberating.

During the English Civil War in the mid 17th century, in the year 1647 to be exact, Cromwell and his victorious officers gathered in an Anglican Church in Putney to pray and ask for direction in re-shaping and re-forming the structures of England, what they then though of as a permanent post-monarchy state.

Of course within 50 years the monarchy was back though with significantly diminished powers. Anyways, Cromwell and his officers thought it wise to meet with the ordinary soldiers and ask what they desired in a newly formed state.

Far ahead of what was then possible, though within 200 years it would be possible, the leaders of these soldiers asked for a voice, for a name, for influence.

One of the named voices in the transcripts, a man named Thomas Rainsborough said it most eloquently and beautifully, *“For really I think that the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest hee; and therefore truly, Sr, I think itt clear, that every Man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own Consent to put himself under that Government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he hath not had a voice to put Himself under.”* (spelling is in the original document)

I hear in this the poetry and the sensibility of the one who was called and named by God to play a crucial part in God’s plan of salvation; who as one of the poorest “shes” uttered her “let it be” at just the right time; though puzzled by what was happening she remained patient, pondering, praying, watching and pointing to God.

I find it astonishing, heartening and truly awesome that the two most revered people in human history are not the Caesars or the Presidents or the Philosophers but a humble country girl and the Son born of this woman. When my heart takes that in how can I not sing?