

Meeting Mary

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Luke 1:26–38

For many of us, this is a season for family. We make time, and maybe we even travel some distance, to be with our relatives.

This is a good thing!

Mostly.

Let's be honest, now. Even though there is of course a lot in these Christmastime family gatherings that's truly the stuff of cherished memories, these events come also

with their downsides,
their risks,
their potential for discomfort and even conflict.

So many families know the awkward dance performed by those gathered — you know the one — as relatives sashay and pirouette around topics that might cause strife and even loud arguments:

favorite sports teams,
politics,
life-style choices,
long-buried resentments,
not-so-hidden grievances.

We know the aggressive stance some begin to take as the conversation veers a certain way. We know the look they get when a nerve has been struck, the change in voice when a line has been crossed.

We know the mischievous glint in the eye of the troublemaker, the family's own disturber-of-the-peace,

who is looking for truth, and looking for trouble; who sees these actually
as one and the same;
who wants just to get at what is *real*,
and will overturn the apple cart,
or the apple tart,
to drag everyone to it.

And we know the fluttering of the peacemakers,

those busy little butterflies of denial,
those border collies of courtesy,

who hover around the conversation, shooing away the uncomfortable stuff as if those were pesky flies near a bowl of fruit salad in July.

What a good many families discover about each other this time of year is this: *they're related, but they just can't relate.*

They can't relate! They don't get each other. And, to be honest, it's not clear that they really *want* to. The differences seem so broad, the other's perspective so alien.

And yet, as family, they do their best to set aside their discomfort, this nagging sense that they just can't relate.

The best of them, though, use the time to deepen their understanding of each other. They approach each other as if they were almost meeting each other anew,

with kind questioning,
honest speaking,
humble listening,

open to a deepening understanding and appreciation for this member of the family, known yet never fully known.



It seems to me that many of us can't relate to Mary. Yes, Mary:

the mother of Jesus,
the Blessed Virgin,
the one especially favored of God.

Maybe not literally, or conventionally, but really and truly, she is family. We're related. In the good news of Jesus, we're related. As those wanting to gather around the Christ child, we're related. As children of God, we're related. If Christ is our brother, and she is his mother, then we must be related.

And yet, she is so different. Her experience is so foreign. She acts and speaks in ways we have trouble imagining of ourselves. We're *related* to her, and yet we just can't *relate* to her. We don't get her. And it's not clear that we really want to. The differences between us and her seem so broad, her perspective so alien.

Now we might overlook this, or discount it. Yet, Protestants that we are, we've got some resistance to Mary. There's kind of an allergy to things about Mary among Protestant Christians. Of course, this is a reaction to the great focus on Mary in many expressions of Roman Catholicism, which has long seemed, to those who are not Catholic — let's just say it: to *us* — seemed to be too much. For the most part, we don't get

the adoration of Mary,
the veneration,
the praying to her,
the assertions and doctrines about her that have little or no biblical warrant.

We just don't get it.
But the thing with reactions,

even when they are spurred by a perception of error,
even when they are prompted by love for Jesus,
even when they arise from a commitment to scripture,

can become *over*-reactions, especially when combined with a mixture of religious superiority and spiritual pride. Add to that a fear of what is different or unknown, well, what we have then is a recipe for the further unnecessary fracturing of the Christian faith driven by suspicion, innuendo, and bearing false-witness against one's neighbor.

I'd like us stop overreacting when it comes to Mary. I'd like us to try meeting her again. And maybe then we'll discover that we *are* related, and that we can, bit by bit, relate to her.



Yet we do have to come to terms with what is *unrelatable* about her. For there's a whole bunch.

Her profound obedience to God is the biggest thing. Yes, her ready acceptance of this plan that would upend her life: this is what is most unrelatable about Mary. When the angel says to her that she will soon become pregnant and bear a child who would inherit the throne of David and who would be called "Son of God," she offers no objection.

She doesn't hem and haw.
She doesn't ask how she will be helped when the gossip starts to fly.
She doesn't whine about what she'll do
 when other woman call her a tramp
 and when other children call her son a bastard.
She doesn't push back with what-ifs and worst-case scenarios.
She doesn't try to get some benefit for her taking on this "job."
She doesn't do any of those things we would do,
 even if we would possibly say "Yes,"
 which, of course, we probably wouldn't.

Instead, Mary basically says "Okay."

And the way she says "Okay" is itself remarkable. In English, it's translated as "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." I think that's a fine translation. I'm not sure there's another way to say it in modern English. But it seems to me that the way Luke wrote this, in the long-ago language in which he wrote it long ago, Mary agrees in the most self-deprecating way possible. It's as if she just humbly and modestly raises her hand, as if she's trying not to call too much attention to herself, and then she answers the angel as if simply to identify herself as she has already been identified:

"Here: The servant of the Lord."

She is not rising to her feet with steel in her spine and declaring, "Here I am! Here I roar!"

She's not stepping up and proclaiming, "I've got this!"

Hers is not a declaration of independence. This is no clarion cry of self-actualization.

Instead, this remarkable young woman simply sees her place in God's plan, a place already prepared for her, and she simply accepts, or acknowledges, what God has already put in motion.

How different this is from us, who can't resist making it all about us, who always want to be the central actors in our own personal dramas.

How different this is from us, who treat goodness as the exception rather than the norm, who calculate and decide on our obedience to God by how it feels.

I want to be more like Mary. I want to be so good, so obedient to God. Yet at the same time, I don't! There continues this attraction to the bad, the allure of disobedience. There continues this placing of my own comfort at the apex of my values. Mary's acceptance is, for me, both commendable and impossible, both attractive and scary. I *want* to relate to her. In some ways, I think I can — maybe? But I also feel it all as so unrelatable.



But you know, in a way, I think that Mary is *supposed* to be unrelatable. Not totally. Just partly. We're supposed to feel a difference between us and Mary.

When the angel Gabriel meets Mary, and she him, Gabriel says these words to her: "Greetings favored one!" And the thing about those words, "favored one" (or "highly favored one") is that these aren't said to just anybody in the Bible. In the New Testament, it's applied to Mary and Jesus. That's it. No one else. They alone are singled out for such approval. They alone deserve these words.

What I mean to say is that Mary has a unique place in the work of God. And maybe that rubs against our deep-seated (and valid) belief in the equality of all people. Or maybe we feel a little envy that she would be called "highly favored," and told that God is with her. "What about me???!!" we cry. We want to be favored, too! We, too, want to hear those words, "The Lord is with you"!

Or do we, really? To be favored in *this* way, to have God with you in *such* a manner ... who among us really wants *that*?

And yet even in her pure uniqueness, Mary has much that compels us to relate to. Because she shows us

that we're not the center of the action;
that God's love for us doesn't make us the stars of our own show;
that the grace of God is meant not only to lift us up but also to humble us;
and not only to humble us, but also to lift us up;
that the joy into which God invites us
is not in finding ourselves,
not in self-discovery,
but rather in locating ourselves within the place God has already prepared
for us.



The Anglican priest and poet Malcolm Guite is a friend of Kelly and Kevin, my poet sister and biographer brother-in-law. Malcolm wrote this poem about the Annunciation:

Annunciation

*We see so little, stayed on surfaces,
We calculate the outsides of all things,
Preoccupied with our own purposes
We miss the shimmer of the angels' wings,
They coruscate around us in their joy
A swirl of wheels and eyes and wings unfurled,
They guard the good we purpose to destroy,
A hidden blaze of glory in God's world.
But on this day a young girl stopped to see
With open eyes and heart. She heard the voice;
The promise of His glory yet to be,
As time stood still for her to make a choice;
Gabriel knelt and not a feather stirred,
The Word himself was waiting on her word.*

[<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/03/24/a-sonnet-for-the-annunciation/>]



In meeting Mary, may we learn more and more about her, about ourselves, and about the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In meeting Mary, may we in some ways be more like her, and in all ways be more like the “us” God has made us to be.

In meeting Mary, may our lives more and more have the shape of Christmas love and Christmas joy and Christmas obedience and Christmas peace, to the Glory of God.