

“Mary, the Mother of God”
28 March 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
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READING: from The Power of Myth — Joseph Campbell

Motherhood is a sacrifice. On our veranda in Hawaii the birds come to feed. Each year there have been one or two mother birds. When you see a mother bird, plagued by her progeny for food, with five baby birds, some of them bigger than she is, flopping all over her – ‘Well,’ you think, ‘this is the symbol of motherhood, this giving of your substance and every damn thing to your progeny.’ That is why the mother becomes the symbol of Mother Earth. She is the one who has given birth to us and on whom we live and on whose body we find our food.

READING: Luke 8: 19-21

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him for the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

READING: from The Gospel According to the Son — Norman Mailer

In the crowd I saw my mother. Soon I would be torn from her. Now, and too late, I understood her love. I was a gift from the Lord, and so, in her awe of me, she had contended with all I did. For to live constantly in awe is like not knowing one’s own child. But in this hour she was in great pain for me. I belonged to my mother again.

READING: Some Slippery Afternoon — Daniela Gioseffi

A silver watch you’ve worn for years
is suddenly gone
leaving a pale white stripe
blazing on your wrist.

A calendar in which you’ve marked all the appointments
you’ve kept
(or meant to keep)
disappears
leaving a faded spot on the wall
where it hung.
You search the house and yard and trash cans for weeks
and never find it.

One night the glass in your windows
vanishes
leaving you sitting in a gust of wind.
You think how a leg is suddenly lost
beneath a subway train
or a taxi wheel
some slippery afternoon.

The child you’ve raised for years

combing each lock
tailoring each smile, each tear,
each valuable thought,
suddenly metamorphoses into a harlequin
and joins the circus passing in the street
never to be seen again.

One morning you wash your face,
look into the mirror,
and find the water has eroded your features,
worn them smooth as a rock in a brook.
A blank oval peers back at you
too mouthless to cry out
for what has suddenly gone.

SERMON: Mary, the Mother of God — Rob Eller-Isaacs

Her eyes are dark brown. Her olive skin is darkened by the desert sun. Her long hair is drawn into a single braid. She's 13 years old and she's going to have a baby. Her name, in the language of her people, is Maryam. In Hebrew, the ritual language of the Jewish people, her name would be Miriam, after the sister of Moses. Four centuries after her death when Rome has become the center of Christendom her name will be Maria. Later still she will come to be called by her English name, Mary.

Among the many controversies which forged and plagued the early Christian church was one which centered on the question of whether or not Maryam could bear the title "Theotokos," the Greek term meaning Mother of God. It began as a bitter dispute between Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, over the proper way of conceiving the relationship between the human and divine aspects of Jesus. Cyril insisted that Maryam, the Judean peasant girl who had given birth to Jesus should properly be referred to as "Theotokos, Mother of God." Nestorius sternly disagreed. Emperor Theodosius II summoned a meeting in the summer of 431 at Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor in order to resolve the issue. The representatives of the two opposing groups could not agree even to meet. The Council ended before it began when each group excommunicated the other. Two years later Cyril cut a deal with some of Nestorius's followers whereby Nestorius himself would be excommunicated but they would be restored to their full Christian status in exchange for agreeing that Maryam could henceforth be addressed as the Mother of God.

A cynical observer of the history of the church might well attribute the rise of Mary to be a marketing ploy. Patriarchal monotheism might sell out in the desert where, as Joseph Campbell often pointed out, "It's hard to love the Mother." But once Christianity became the state religion it needed to broaden its appeal. A large percentage of those Theodosius and his successors sought to convert and subdue worshiped the Great Mother. It made good political sense to elevate Maryam by designating her "Theotokos," with the understanding that her standing and her image would help make Christianity more appealing to those for whom the Holy can take many forms.

But there is far more implied in the elevation of Maryam into Mary, the Mother of God than the political agenda of Christendom ascendant. Though misguided, rigid men in every generation have attempted to tap and redirect her power, the feminine principle will never be subdued. Do we need to be reminded that each and all of us will always be our mother's children? "She is the one who has given birth to us and on whom we live and on whose body we find our food." However fierce the desert fathers may have been even they could not eradicate the Mother.

Not that they didn't try. Lesley Hazleton in her recently published Mary, a Flesh-and-Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother asks:

"How can we know so little about her? She lived in Nazareth, that we know. And she had a son. Beyond these bare facts, she is given mere cameo appearances in the New Testament gospels: anxious at the Temple and at the wedding at Cana, and in only the last one, John, grieving at the foot of the cross. Even then she is nameless, simply, 'his mother.' And Paul? In all his voluminous letters, he never even mentions her.

Everything else we think we know – even who her parents were – is legend accrued over the centuries, far removed from her in both time and place. And though those legends are magnificent, they work as perhaps all legends do: they obscure any

idea of who the real person was. Each successive image of Mary has taken her progressively further from the reality of Maryam. She has been used, as all those who are venerated are inevitably used, to further individual, social, theological and even political causes. She has been garbed in silver and pearls, crowned with gold and girded with angels. And in the process she has disappeared. She has become all image and no reality: a virtual Mary. Or rather, an infinite number of virtual Marys."

There are "an infinite number of virtual Marys." Ancient icons painted on wood staring straight ahead, upright as a garden gate. Blushing Renaissance maidens in low-cut gowns smiling softly down at their adorable chubby little babies. Striking starkly modern angled images of womanhood like shattered glass. The resignation and the agony in marble of the Pieta, the crowning gothic glory of the Mary rose at Chartres – every image takes us deeper into the mystery of Mary. And none of them does more than touch the surface of how it feels and what it means to bring new life into the world.

No virtual image, no disembodied spirit can comfort a flesh-and-blood parent who has had to watch her or his child leave or even die, who has stood by helpless to hold on to the child who had taught him or her the intricacies of true love.

*The child you've raised for years
combing each lock
tailoring each smile, each tear,
each valuable thought,
suddenly metamorphoses into a harlequin
and joins the circus passing in the street
never to be seen again.*

There is nothing more physical, more immediate, more real than the connection between a mother and her child. Whether one loses one's child to awe as Norman Mailer imagines Maryam lost Jesus or to physical death as the Passion stories tell, there comes a grief so deep one drowns in it and disappears.

*One morning you wash your face,
look into the mirror,
and find the water has eroded your features,
worn them smooth as a rock in a brook.
A blank oval peers back at you
too mouthless to cry out
for what has suddenly gone.*

There are two ways to look for Maryam. We can search for her among the rumors, hints and ruins of our history. Or we can try to recognize the virtues she has come to represent in everyone we meet. The quest for the historical Jesus has shed considerable light but has brought no firm conclusions. The scientific study of the Bible has debunked the reigning myths surrounding singular sources, let alone divine authorship. Yet all of these sensible, reasonable, even enlightened efforts have neither stemmed the rise of fundamentalism nor inspired deeper faith among those of us who seem to want to know the facts.

Maryam is scarcely mentioned in the gospels. Once she has performed her duty by giving birth to God she disappears. Once Jesus has begun his ministry Maryam is mentioned only as a way to make a troubling point. "And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you.' But he said to them, 'my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'" The text brings to mind the way so-called religious cults encourage young adults to turn away from their families, rejecting the values and the safety of home for the promise of living new and far more satisfying lives. Those who take the story literally cannot avoid seeing Mary as no more than a handmaiden in service to her son. Once he himself has heard "the word of God" she no longer has any unusual access to him. She becomes just like anybody else. It would be less than human for her not to feel rejected and abandoned.

Yet for those with eyes to see and ears to hear the story takes a radically different direction. Having learned about love, having found out how to heal at his mother's knee, might it not be just as true that Jesus meant to bring the love and healing he had found at home out into the world? Can't the text be read not as rejection of his earthly mother but as the ultimate fulfillment of his mother's love? Just as each of harbors within us a spark of the divine, just as each one here and every human being everywhere lives in the tension between the spirit and the flesh Mary must have longed to be more than the Mother of God.

"In the crowd I saw my mother. Soon I would be torn from her. Now, and too late, I understood her love. I was a gift from the Lord, and so, in her awe of me, she had contended with all I did. For to live constantly in awe is like not knowing ones own child. But in this hour she was in great pain for me. I belonged to my mother again."

Among the four gospels only John places Mary among the women who wait at the foot of the cross as Jesus is dying. For Matthew, Mark, and Luke she had done her duty and then disappeared. But John had a different agenda. John, heavily influenced by the Greek Gnostic image of Sophia, the Mother of Wisdom in truth, the Great Goddess, seemed to understand the ambiguity and power of the role that Mary played.

So in this Lenten season when we take time to think about our lives may we be strengthened in our resolve to live within the tension of true love. For as Kahlil Gibran reminds us, *"Our children are not our children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself."* It was true for Maryam and it still rings true for you and me. It's no less true to say our mothers are not our mothers. They are the ones who give birth to life's longing. And so we praise both Maryam, the Judean girl who had a baby that she dearly loved and Theotokos, Mary, the Mother of God who everywhere in every land and by a thousand names still reigns.

May it be so and Amen.