



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Mary, There When We Need Her

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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We gladly turn our attention Mary today - around whom all is calm and bright. She brings us respite from the brutality of these last days with her courage and grace. But when we look at Mary's story, we see that it's just like ours, filled with uncertainty, struggle, and heartbreak. We will sing a hymn in a little bit that reminds us we cannot think of her as just the mother of a newborn, nestled down in the warmth of the stable.

"Sing we of the blessed Mother who received the angel's word,
and obedient to the summons bore in love the infant Lord;
sing we of the joys of Mary at whose breast the child was fed
who is Son of God eternal and the everlasting Bread."

Sing we, too, of Mary's sorrows, of the sword that pierced her through,
When beneath the cross of Jesus she his weight of suffering knew,
Looked upon her Son and Savior reigning from the awful tree,
Saw the price of our redemption paid to set the sinner free.

What do we know of this woman about whom we sing? Emotionally, we are well acquainted with her; we know what she represents. But literally, we know very little. We know that she was young, engaged to and eventually married a man named Joseph who was a carpenter. We are also told that she lived in the village of Nazareth and that she had a baby who was named Jesus and that there was something irregular about the circumstances of her pregnancy. That is the extent of the biographical information that we have that pertains to the Christmas story.

Sociological and historical information will begin to fill out what we know. She is first of all a woman in a strongly patriarchal culture and an occupied country. We can surmise her vulnerability to a culture that was harsh on unconventional pregnancies. But our tradition embraces Mary as courageous in the face of the unknown and likely shame. Her story has elements of all of our stories.

In our story today, she has travelled to visit Elizabeth, an older cousin or friend with the plan to remain for some time. Not the usual activity of a happy newlywed. I hear her seeking the solace of someone else with a remarkable pregnancy. We can only imagine what Elizabeth's neighbors were saying about her - "Seriously, at her age!" Where better to retreat from the unkind world, than with someone who can sit and share stories of shame and say "me, too."

We have a story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus fleeing their home out of fear that the baby would be killed. Egypt, that historic land of slavery is their refuge. Again, we have no details except that after the death of the murderous Herod, the family returned. Here we can imagine some details; a refugee, feeling like an outsider, worried that Joseph wouldn't find work quickly enough for them so be safe and fed. Where would they turn for help if they had to ask because they had run out of options? How humiliating to need help. Perhaps we can imagine someone recognizing their struggle, reaching out with bread, and saying "I've been there."

The next story we have of Mary is their trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12. When it was time to begin the trip back home, they didn't realize that Jesus wasn't with them and they had to go back to find him. He was unconcerned; of course, he would be in the Temple, his father's house. But can you imagine Mary's inner demons having a field day - "What kind of a mother are you?" "A good mother wouldn't have let this happen." When those awful moments happen to us, Mary looks over, nods her head and says, "me, too."

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As Jesus was beginning his ministry in earnest, there was that horrible day when Mary and Jesus' siblings went to find him. He was inside talking with people and when he was told that they were outside, he dismissed them saying "Who is my mother and my brothers?" How humiliating for a mother to stand in front of witnesses and be told that she was no more important to him than people he barely knew. We have no idea if there was any sense at that time that he was creating a new kind of community, a new kind of family. At that moment, it just had to hurt. You can imagine what the village gossip had to say. Apparently, she was a bad mother and not good enough to matter to her son. How do you stand strong in the face of such shame?

As you might have guessed, I'm coming back to Dr. Brené Brown – my co-preacher for Advent. Her work on vulnerability and the power of shame in our lives has taken a hold of my imagination so that I now recognize it everywhere. I'm reading her book *Daring Greatly*, and it is tremendous. She spent over a decade listening to people's stories about how shame operates in their lives and relationships. To disempower the shame demon and develop what she calls shame resilience, the most important thing is to find the people with whom you can share your story. It obviously has to be people that have earned your trust who will let you be vulnerable without exploitation. Overcoming the power of shame begins when we realize that we are not alone in our experience, when we hear someone say, "me too." "I've been there and it's awful." It gives you courage to say, "I really messed up and now I want to fix it." Or "I tried and I failed, but I'm not a failure. I'm not the only one that this has happened to." "I'm not the only parent who feels like they've messed up." It's truly one of the things that Mary's story does for me. Anything that I might go through, I can reflect on her and realize that she is reaching through the ages to comfort me with a nod and a "me, too."

She is there with every grieving parent, with every person who's been beat down by the ways that life isn't fair. The strength that Mary received as Elizabeth came running out of her house to say that she saw something radiant and powerful in Mary was a moment of overcoming shame. Mary responded with the most powerful song in the new Testament – the Magnificat. "I may be small and of little consequence, but God thinks I'm worthy and if God can raise me up, then anything is possible. Tyranny and inequality will tumble down when others like me learn that we are worthy to stand before God."

That's really what Advent gets us ready for – learning that we are loved, accepted, that nothing that we can do will disconnect us from the source of all love and goodness. Up until this Advent, I'd always struggled to understand what it is that gets in the way of our believing in such acceptance. I hope that I haven't worn you out with Dr. Brown's work but I truly see that if we get a handle on this, we will understand much about ourselves and what we see in the world. And we will know how to free ourselves from its tyranny. It makes me very hopeful to have such knowledge and a sense of what it can accomplish. It is reinforced when I see such examples of it from our faith. Mary is too powerful a figure to be relegated to plastic saint status, shackled by being God's good little girl. She was a real woman dealing with real problems and she was a real disciple. Listen to her song when we sing it at the Offertory. It is joy, sorrow, hope and victory.

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