

“Picking Just the Right Woman”

a sermon by

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Text: “And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you’” (Luke 1:28).

The *Crimson* is the name of Harvard University’s daily newspaper. Harvey Cox, who has taught at the Harvard Divinity School for a number of years, told of a student who came to see him one day calling attention to an ad that ran in the student newspaper, which read as follows:

“We are searching for an intelligent, healthy, and very attractive woman 19-30 years old of English-American descent. Must be 5’4”, small to medium build with brown/blue eyes.”

The student told Cox that the ad was a solicitation for human female eggs to be used for in vitro fertilization. The young woman went on to say that the *Crimson* often ran these notices and that the money they offered for one female egg ranged from \$5,000 to \$50,000, a serious inducement for a young woman anticipating a large tuition loan debt, as many students do today. She wanted to know if she could write a term paper on the ethical issues raised by this growing practice. When Cox asked what part of the Gospel narratives had brought this question to mind, the student answered by saying that it was the story of the “Annunciation,” the angel’s announcement to Mary that she would bear the child Jesus. After all, the student said, “God must have been looking for someone very special, and Mary’s pregnancy had begun without sexual intercourse, as would the pregnancies initiated by these seeds from Harvard Yard.”

Though intrigued by her interest in this story, Cox did point out to this young student that whatever other virtues the Virgin Mary had, she was not a student in an elite university and that even though she is often pictured in paintings of the ‘Annunciation’ kneeling with a small prayer book in her hands, she probably could not read. He added that she was decidedly not of the ethnic background these ads usually sought, had probably not reached her late teens, and was already engaged to be married.

I.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is very much on people's mind today. This weekend Hollywood released the film "The Nativity," which depicts in a very sympathetic way the birth of Jesus and the terrible situation in which Mary found herself. Her picture appeared on the cover of this month's *Christianity Today* along with a story entitled "The Mary We Never Knew: Why the Mother of Jesus was More Revolutionary Than We've Been Led to Believe," and I will be very surprised if her picture does not grace the cover of next week's *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek* as well.

In truth, there are two very different images of Mary that emerge in the New Testament. One wears a Carolina blue robe, exudes piety from a baby son in her arms, and barely makes eye contact with us. This is the Mary that is most familiar to Protestant Christians. She is viewed as a humble, obedient, servant, who witnesses great things, but who "keeps them and ponders them in her heart" (Luke 1:12).

But there is another Mary in the New Testament. She has a very strong and fiery personality. In her song, "The Magnificat," she utters poetry fit for a political rally, goes toe-to-toe with King Herod, musters her motherly authority to reprimand her messiah son for dallying at the Temple (Luke 2), chides him at a wedding for not being more considerate of the host and commands him to do some of his magic and change the water into wine (John 2:1-12). This Mary also finds the feistiness to take her children to Capernaum to rescue him from death threats. This Mary followed Jesus all the way to the Cross—not just as a mother, but as a disciple, even after his closest disciples had abandoned him.

II.

Scholars have noted for some time that whereas the Gospel of Matthew presents the birth of Jesus from the viewpoint of his father, Joseph, the Gospel of Luke examines the birth of Jesus through the lens of his mother, Mary. In some ways the choice of Mary as the mother of the Son of God echoes the words of the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth where Paul writes, "but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (I Corinthians 1: 26-29).

Certainly Mary fits that profile. She was among the most powerless people in her society: she was young in world that values age; female in a world ruled by men; poor in a stratified economy.

Without question Mary the Mother of Jesus is painted in the New Testament with strokes that are broad and subtle. But there are two images that give us a real insight into the Advent and Christmas Season.

III.

The first is the image of Mary, the “revolutionary.” It is what *Christianity Today* calls “the Incendiary Mary.” The Mary of the “Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46-55) is not the gentle Mary, meek and mild. We who are Protestants have made her this, but we have been blind and deaf to the very Scripture we claim to protect. To understand this Mary a person has to understand the world in which she lived. Her world was the world of Herod the Great, the King of the Jews. This Herod had assassinated his own family for anything that remotely smacked of disloyalty or treachery. So when Mary spoke of the birth of her son who would “bring down rulers from their thrones and lift up the humble,” no one would have missed the incendiary nature of her words.

But it wasn’t just Herod, it was Rome as well. Rome had its own gospel, which told of the significance of Caesar Augustus for the world. Caesar Augustus was not just an emperor. He was declared to be a “god” and the “savior” of the world.

Mary tells us that Caesar Augustus is not the savior of the world. The savior of the world, according to Mary, is her son Jesus, who was born not in a palace but a stable, who will not rule with force and violence, but who will rule with love and peace. This is a king who will give his life for his people to “save them from sin and death.” Mary’s son is the one who will “put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalt those of low degree. He will fill the hungry with good things and the rich he will send away empty”(Luke 1:51ff.).

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to reveal the injustice of slavery, or Harper Lee, whose *To Kill a Mockingbird* revealed the insidiousness of racial hypocrisy, this Mary tells us what God will do through her son to subvert the injustices of Herod and the pretentiousness of Augustus. Her voice tells us that somehow, in some way, someday, God will establish a kingdom of peace for the whole world.

IV.

The second image of Mary that shines through the Gospels is the image of a mother who watched her son grow from infancy to childhood and finally to adulthood. She witnessed the adoring crowds that followed her son. She was also present when those same crowds crucified him and left him to die on a cross. Simeon was right when he told this young mother that “a sword will pierce your heart”(Luke 2:35). And surely it did.

David Brooks recently wrote a piece in the *New York Times* that he entitled “The Education of Robert Kennedy.” It was written in response to the movie “Bobby,” that has just been released and that recounts the story of this remarkable young politician and his tragic assassination that occurred only five years after the assassination of his brother, President John F. Kennedy. In this piece Brooks recalls the devastation that engulfed Bobby Kennedy after his brother’s death. He became terribly depressed. He lost so much weight that his own clothes did not fit him. He was lost in every way. Strangely enough, it was a book that his sister-in-law, Jackie Kennedy, gave him that turned his life around. It was a book by Edith Hamilton entitled *The Greek Way*. The book pointed Bobby Kennedy to the power of the great Greek Tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, and their profound understanding of the tragic nature of human life.

In some way the same thing must have happened to Mary. She must have had some inclination of this at that time in the Temple when as a boy he told his mother and father that “he had to be about his father’s business. ” In that sense Mary must have known that Jesus had never belonged to her and never would. There was another calling.

Maybe she knew from the beginning when the angel Gabriel told her that she would give birth to a child and she responded by saying, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

This is the real Mary, and we need to reclaim her as our own.

Amen!