

*A sermon given on Sunday, December 19, 2010
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***Mother Mary, Part Four
The Handmaid of the Lord: Faith***

A piece in last Monday's New York Times reports as follows:

Stand on a corner in [Fort Worth] and you might get a case of theological whiplash. A public bus rolls by with an atheist message on its side: "Millions of people are good without God." Seconds later, a van follows bearing a riposte: "I still love you. – God," with another line that says, "2.1 billion Christians are good with God."ⁱ

It seems that a group of atheists bought ad space on four city buses to reach out to non-believers who might feel isolated during the holiday season. "It can be pretty lonely for a nonbeliever at Christmastime around here. There is so much religion," says a representative of the Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason, which paid for the atheist ads. But reaction has been swift. Some ministers organized a boycott of the buses, while a group of local businessmen paid for the van with a pro-religion message to drive around behind the atheist-messaged buses.

The whole thing seems pretty silly. The atheists' slogan, that millions of people are "good without God", does not appear to be supported by the explanation that they run the ads because they are lonely at Christmastime. Apparently, they are *not* good without God! Or at least, they are missing a sense of community, and they know it. But I don't see the point in running an ad to say so. On the other hand, a bus boycott is a misdirected response. And does the math of the thing really matter? Millions are good without God; two billion are good with God – is faith really a popularity contest? Is God looking to win an election, honestly? Does it matter how many other people have faith? And what do we mean by 'faith', anyway?

For maybe 1400 years, from the 4th century until the 19th century, faith was understood primarily in terms of agreement with some authorized version of things. "The opposite of faith was heresy. Faith was the given, revealed, and authorized version of reality. Faith was creed."ⁱⁱ Faith was intellectual assent to a set of theological formulations, and in some times and places, holding to a different set of formulations got you burned at the stake. Beginning in the 19th century, with the rise of the scientific world view and modern sensibilities, the question of faith shifted. It wasn't what you believed but whether you believed. The opposite of faith became not heresy, but doubt. The danger wasn't so much that you would believe the wrong thing, but that you wouldn't believe anything. I suppose that is still the debate on the sides of buses in Fort Worth.

In both cases, however, faith is understood primarily as a matter of the head, a binary question of cognitive formulation: I believe, or I don't believe. If you want to put numbers on the side of a bus, the debate is interesting enough. From the standpoint of spiritual well-being, however, it seems quite beside the point. A living faith is not passive or theoretical acceptance of a set of beliefs. It is an active and engaged relationship with One in whom we place our confidence. Faith, says Martin Smith, is "the exercise of a choice to interpret reality in terms of a loving God, [and is] creative and voluntary, not given and imposed."ⁱⁱⁱ Not creed, not intellectual certainty, but trust. Trust is the vital dimension of faith, surely.

Which brings us to the Virgin Mary.

We have considered these past weeks how Mary has been understood as the New Eve, the God-bearer, the Queen of Heaven, and the Mother of Sorrows. Today our Gospel lesson invites us to reflect upon Mary as the “Servant of the Lord,” the Model of Faith.

Here it is, plain and simple, in today’s reading from Luke [1:26-38], the story of the Annunciation. From the angel Gabriel comes the astonishing news that Mary will bear a child, and that this child will be the Messiah. If the opposite of faith really were doubt, we might have to question the faith of Mary. For Mary is perplexed and questions the possibility of this unexpected birth announcement. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” she asks. And do we really imagine that Gabriel’s response cleared it all up? Oh, well, says the angel, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,” and your child will be holy. And, oh by the way, your superannuated cousin Elizabeth is pregnant, too! Would this satisfy all Mary’s uncertainty and doubts? Really?!

And yet. And yet Mary responds: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Not intellectual assent. Not a creedal statement. But trust. What we have here is trust. Trust that this perplexing, altogether unexpected and even unimaginable request would be accompanied by the grace and strength to carry it out. This was Mary’s faith, and this is why all generations have called her blessed.

The image of Mary as Model of Faith is perhaps the most universal of all those which we have considered. Certainly it is the one most fully embraced by the Protestant tradition. Mary as *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, is primary for the Eastern Orthodox. Queen of Heaven and Mother of Sorrows are images most common in Roman Catholic circles. But Mary as Model of Faith passed the test for the Protestant Reformers. *Sola scriptura* – “Scripture is the only authority!” cried the Reformers. And this image of Mary was explicitly biblical. *Sola fide* – “Salvation by faith alone!” cried the Reformers. And Mary was the exemplar. ‘Let it be with me according to your word’ was Mary’s expression of faith, said Martin Luther, a faith which “does not require information, knowledge, or certainty, but a free surrender and a joyful bet on [God’s] unfelt, untried, and unknown goodness.”^{iv} Mary is the Model of Faith because, in the face of challenge and perplexity, she had the courage and trust to say ‘yes.’

Let’s think for a moment about two things that the faith of Mary is not. First, Mary’s faith is not passive submission. Richard Pervo has put it well:

We have had enough emphasis upon ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord’ as a means for stressing passive obedience and docile submission, particularly for women. The annunciation rather depicts a young woman remarkable for radical openness to the presence of God in her life, a girl willing to undergo shame and vilification in response to a fearful vocation. We must not suppose that people of that time were so naïve as to listen happily to the claim that a particular baby came from God. To become the handmaid of the Lord Mary needed and received the gift of courage to break free of enslavement to culture and convention.^v

Not passive submission, then, but a trust that responds with both courage and action. This is the faith of Mary.

Second, Mary’s faith is not a fleeting, once-and-forever moment. Faith is required of her again, and again, and again. At the Annunciation, yes, when she hears this startling news. And again soon after, at the Visitation, when her cousin Elizabeth reminds her just what a big deal this really is going to be. And again at the Presentation, when the prophet Simeon foretells that a sword of sorrow will pierce her soul. And again when Jesus is out about teaching, and she finds

him too busy even to speak with her. And again when he is arrested, and tried, and tortured. And finally at the Crucifixion, when she refuses to flee from the unspeakable horror of her son's death. At each moment Mary's faith is challenged. If Mary is a model for us, it is in part because we know this to be true. Would but that we could be faithful for just one moment, and find that to be enough! If only we could muster our faith, prove it once, and rest on that halo-shaped laurel forever. But we find we cannot, and thus is Mary our exemplar once more, for at each moment, by God's grace, Mary's faith bears up.

Speaking of our own faith – how about it? What are the times when we, too, must trust in the face of perplexity? What for us are the moments of response which call for faith? Can you identify them, even without the angel? I mean, it would be scary, I suppose, but if an angel shows up with an assignment from God, it's at least pretty definite. Sometimes I should like to feel the brush of angel wings to know it really is God calling. Mostly, instead, we have decisions to wrestle with; or sleepless nights; or surprising choices to make; or unexpected opportunities to do something good, something that matters. These are the moments which call for faith.

I see it in the lives of those in this parish all the time. It might be something big, like visiting with incarcerated women, or shipping crates of used books halfway around the world. It might be something sacrificial and life-changing, like setting aside vocational aspirations to be a caregiver to your in-laws. It might also be something as small as the act of one who baked a sweet potato pie for the homeless dinner, even though she had no spare hour to do any such thing.

There are moments of response: New undertakings. New work, perhaps, or retirement and the absence of work. New family responsibilities. A child conceived. A parent diminished and requiring help. A friend in need. A stranger in need. A relocation. A diagnosis received. An occasion to which you must rise.

And Mary said, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And we say, How can this be, since I am not qualified? How can this be, since I am an amateur? How can this be since I am not ready? How can this be, since I am scared? And in all these moments, we, like Mary, are invited to trust, invited to act, invited to say 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord.' We are invited, by God's grace, to have the faith of Mary.

This week I had an email which pleased me very much. Speaking about our Advent sermon series, the writer said, "I must confess you are working uphill to have me appreciate Mary, but the three sermons so far have intrigued me mightily and I have learned a lot." I was grateful for her words, and I affirmed her choice of verb: 'to appreciate' Mary. Which is to say, it has not been my agenda in this series to promote any special form of Marian devotion, or even to expect veneration in its historical forms. Rather, based on my own experience and that of others I respect, it has seemed helpful to me to fill in the gaps of our Reformed-tradition ignorance, and push against the suspicion which many of us have inherited. I have hoped that we might appreciate Mary's unique place in salvation history, and thus claim whatever inspiration the Spirit enables us to derive from her story.

Though we speak of Mary in our Creed, the faith of Mary herself had little to do with creedal formulas. It did, however, have everything to do with the root meaning of that word, *Credo*. We translate it as, "I believe" – but at its root, it means, "I give my heart." Mary gave her heart, and I should like to do the same.

So, may Mary, the New Eve, remind you that you need not be stuck in past or present patterns of brokenness, but that the hope of God's grace is yours to claim.

May Mary, the Mother of God, the God-bearer, invite you to be a channel through which compassion and mercy might flow.

May Mary, the Queen of Heaven, remind you joyfully to praise God with all the heavenly host, even while Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, acknowledges the reality of grief in every human heart.

May Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord, model for you a faith that enables you to say, "Here I am," with courage and trust.

*Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim throngèd the air;
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the beloved – with a kiss.*

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him – give my heart.*

[Christina Rossetti; Hymn 112]

ⁱ "Atheist Ads on Buses Rattle Fort Worth," by Jas. McKinley *New York Times*, 12/18/2010

ⁱⁱ Martin L. Smith, SSJE, *Nativities and Passions* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 177.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

^{iv} Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 160.

^v Richard Pervo, "Ecumenical Reflection for the Feast of the Visitation," in *The Living Church*, 5.29.88, p. 10.