

**Sunday, December 15, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Blessed and Holy”**

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How do you picture Mary?

Scripture gives us no description at all, only that she was “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph” and that she lived in Nazareth. That’s it.

Mary is mentioned less than 20 times in the New Testament: 5 times in Matthew, once in Mark, 12 times in just 2 chapters of Luke, and never by name in John.

The Acts of the Apostles mentions once, at the beginning, that she is with the disciples.

Most often she is referenced as “Mary, the mother of Jesus,” distinguishing her from the other Marys in the gospel stories.

This dearth of information, however, has not curtailed the development of Mary as an icon; an image of purity and humility; a haloed woman in a blue or red dress.

Over the centuries countless pictures of Mary have been painted, often reflecting the culture and times in which they were created.

In Africa, Christians pray to an African Mary – a Black Madonna;

In Mexico, a Latina Mary;

For us –the most familiar image is likely a fair skinned, brown-haired Mary, most often with a head covering of some sort.

This week, while I was working on my sermon, one of the workmen in the office overhead me talking about Mary. He asked if he could share a book he had on Mary.

He went home and returned with a great treasure of a book, published in 1858, called *Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God*.

It is a 500 page volume that tells the story of Mary from her birth through to her veneration as a saint.

It lists pages of prayers and litanies to Mary.

In describing Mary’s 3-month visit to Elizabeth it says this:

*The Virgin remained three months in the country of the Hethites, within a short distance of the city of Ain, in the depth of a shady and fertile vale, where Zachary had his country house.*

*It was then that the daughter of David—herself, too, a prophetess, and gifted with a genius equal to that of the illustrious founder of her race—could contemplate at her leisure the starry*

*firmament, the stately forests, and the vast ocean as it stretched in ever-changing majesty along the blueish coast of Syria.*

*The blessed Virgin never looked without emotion on those magnificent scenes of the creation.*

*All the works of nature spoke to her heart of their great Author, and gently animated her soul after having charmed her eyes.*

*The plain, which spread far and away towards the mountains of Arabia, the blue dome of heaven, rising like a tent over the habitations of men, gave her an idea of the immensity of the creating God;*

*the rich yellow of the crops, the delicious fruitage, and the fresh mountain-spring announced to her his providence;*

*the voice of the tempest, his power;*

*the arrangement of the heavenly bodies, his wisdom;*

*and his care over the birds of the air and the insects of the earth, his sovereign goodness.*

That's a lot of poetic license!

Mary was adopted over the ages as a mediator for the lowly-through Mary the average believer could gain access to God.

Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation, access to God was limited to the holy men. You had to go through a priest with your petitions.

Mary, however, was available to all.

The book I just quoted contains hundreds of pages of specific prayers to Mary – for health, wisdom, safety.

In works of art, Mary is almost always depicted in surroundings much grander than those she likely had.

She is seated on thrones, or upon velvet cushions – surrounded by angels.

We want Mary to be greater, grander, than the humble servant she likely was.

In Mary, we are reminded that we too are called to bear Jesus Christ into the world.

In Mary, we see that God will use the least likely person to carry out God's will on earth.

When we elevate Mary to a place so far outside of our own reality, we are distancing ourselves from the possibility of having to answer God's call.

Rather than count all the ways that we are not Marys – why not look at all the ways we can be Marys.

Mary was an ordinary person, just like you and I.

She followed the norms of the day.

When she needed comfort and support she went to visit her cousin.

She was religious enough to draw on the words of Hannah's song in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel for her own song of joy. The Magnificat is a combination of the Old Testament proclamation when Hannah found that she was pregnant with Samuel, embellished with words from several psalms.

We can celebrate God's choice of Mary as the mother of Jesus, just as in a few weeks we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, but the real message today is that you too have been chosen by God.

You too are anointed, sent to bring good news.

God looks with favor upon you.

God has done great things for you and covered you with the robe of righteousness.

There is no better example of the transforming power of God's love than the change in Mary from a lowly young woman to one who is called blessed for generations.

Mary's trust in God gives us hope for our own transformation.

What if you went through your day repeating to yourself:

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.”

Do you think it would make a difference?

I do.

I think that when you go through your day with your heart full of love and a sense that you are blessed, your anxiety is reduced, your stress is lowered, you are calmer, you are transformed.

Advent gives us the opportunity to get ready to welcome Jesus into our lives.

It is good that we are given this time, because once we let Jesus in, there is no turning back.

Once our hearts rejoice with love it is hard to return to a life of cynicism and judgment.

Once you count yourself among the blessed, you will see other people in that light as well.

Mary's song is beautiful.

But there is a challenge in her poetry.

Her joy cries out to us to have courage, that we also might be brave enough to be vulnerable to God's transforming grace.

As you go about your week remember that God has chosen you.

You are anointed to bring good news.

God looks with favor upon you.

God has done great things for you and covered you with the robe of righteousness.

You, my dear friends, are among those blessed by God.