

Mary of Nazareth

I have had a long-standing problem with Mary of Nazareth. Our relationship, if anything, has been tentative. I always believed that the “Barbie” Mary fed to me during my formative years could not possibly like me, nor could I admire a woman whom I thought had no personality. Poems about a lovely lady dressed in blue sadly made me ill.

Lately, I’ve realized that my discomfiture with Mary came about because I only knew part of her story. The ubiquitous “they” only taught me about the humble part. The obedient part. The pure, undefiled, immaculate part. “They” were men with a message for women and I rejected that message at an early age.

In reality, those qualities are not bad. Humility is in short supply in these days where we fill kids chock full of self-esteem. Plus, it’s a good thing not to be defiled by the things of this world; power, wealth, titles, and pride, although that is not what the writer of that “Immaculate Mary” hymn intended.

Today, I’d like to focus upon who Mary really was, not upon a Stepford icon Mary constructed by the fathers of the church, but a flesh and blood Mary who lived in the first century .

Mary was the human mother of Jesus, not the virgin queen of heaven. She became pregnant under very difficult circumstances that are more horrific than most of us modern people can imagine. In those times, an unmarried, pregnant woman was a pariah who had committed the absolute worst possible sin, a crime much worse than murder. Women like Mary had no “owner.” No man would ever want her again. The gift of herself would be forever tainted by the sin of her illicit sex which was visible in her child. Her family would disown both her and her child. She might have to resort to prostitution in order to feed herself and her child.

This was and remains the fate of unmarried pregnant women in patriarchal societies. In some patriarchal families today, we know that family families actually murder their daughters, sisters, wives, mothers,

aunts, or cousins who, like Mary, became pregnant by rape or without marriage. We know from the gospel of John that Mary's countrymen became so enraged by women who might have had sexual relations outside of prescribed male relationships, that they felt the need to stone women to death.

Mary would have known what could be her fate when the angel of God asked her to become the mother of God without benefit of holy matrimony. She might have imagined the look of scorn on the faces of her parents, her community, and her rabbi as she tried to explain her situation. The Holy Spirit? Sure Mary, tell us another one. She probably had seen the sad faces of the prostitutes flitting around the edges and dark places of her village, women with no names and no place in society. She might have wondered if that was to be her fate. She probably understood that she could have been doomed and not honored by her obedience and faithfulness to God because she didn't know the history we have studied.

Mary looked at a fate that could be worse than death and said, "Yes!" to God. She accepted both God's proposal and the possibility that she might be an outcast from society. She wasn't a confident Barbie Mary all dressed up in blue, standing on a pedestal far from the maddening crowd, but instead, a frightened young woman who knew exactly what her society would do to a girl like her. Mary wasn't a passive victim, a pale caricature aiming to please the men in her life, but a very strong, smart woman who looked at life clearly, weighed all the options, and trusted enough in God to say, "Yes."

Only a mother like Mary could produce a son like Jesus. Only a woman who was willing to suffer the disapprobation of her society could raise up a son who lived his life on the margins of society preaching the kingdom of God to the most excluded members of society. The blood and the guts and the strength of Mary of Nazareth ran in the veins of Jesus. Through his mother, Jesus learned to challenge, and not to accept the societal norms that harmed the most vulnerable of God's people. Through his mother, Jesus came to know that the ways of God are totally unlike the ways of secular or clerical men. Through his mother, Jesus knew that pat answers, rules and regulations and gender, religious or ethnic stereotypes do not express the fullness of humanity or honor and

reflect the magnificence that is our God. Through the example of his mother, Jesus drew support and recognized that physical death sometimes leads to death.

God surely know what God was doing when God entered into the covenant of the New Testament with a young teenager by the name of Mary. In so doing, God passed over the staid and stolid patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, powerful men God is said to have chosen in the past to show God's way. As Mary sang in her Magnificat and as her son preached to a society confirmed in its practices of exclusion, in the new kingdom, it is the lowly like Mary and Jesus, the pariahs of society, the unwed mothers and the condemned criminals who will be lifted up by the Mighty One.

The church got Mary's message entirely backwards. Obedience doesn't mean meek and mild subservience to the will of the church and the state, but freedom, freedom from the religious, cultural, and political power that oppress and exclude the most vulnerable of God's children. People who follow Jesus are not plastic people marching in lock step humility and unquestioning obedience, but brave Christians who look the worldly powers in the eye and tell them that they shall be cast down from their thrones and sent away empty because the largess of the God is to be shared and not sequestered.

Some people might honor Mary as the virgin queen of heaven. This image obscures the scrappy Palestinian girl who, with the grace of God, took on the religious and political establishment of her time and won. Statues of the rich and famous molder in the dust while statues of Mary, the unwed mother of the condemned criminal stand in every church of Christendom.

Mary is, as she is alleged to have said to Juan Diego at Guadalupe, "The fire that comes from the light."

Is it any wonder that "they" felt obliged to feed us the immaculate, humble, obedient Mary?

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