

Sermon for the Feast of the BVM
Sunday, August 18, 2019
“How will you say ‘Yes’ to God?”

Text: Luke 1:39-55

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning, I would like to offer you a few thoughts about why the Church venerates Mary with such passion. First, Mary is the most blessed among women for all time; second, Mary humbly accepts God’s invitation and call; and, third, Mary is the Mother of God. I’d like to offer a few words about why Mary matters.

The gospel reading that you just heard are the words of the *Magnificat*, the Song of Mary—the song that she sang in response to God’s call to her. After the Annunciation in which Mary was told by the Archangel Gabriel that she was told that she was to bear a son, she embarked on an eight-day journey from her home in Nazareth to the hill country just a few miles outside Jerusalem to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was an elderly woman, but she had also been told through the message of an angel that she was to bear a son; *that* son would be, of course, John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. When Mary greeted her, John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit,

exclaimed “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Luke utilized a verb in Greek that we translate as ‘blessed,’ and is same verb from which we get the English word ‘eulogy’ (εὐλογημένη). ‘Εὐλογημένη’ means that a person is spoken well of in a way that confers some benefit. Elizabeth blessed Mary and the fruit of her womb. The verb is in its perfect passive participle form; the participle describes a characteristic of Mary, the passive indicates that someone else—in other words, God—is the agent of the blessing, and the perfect tense means that although God’s act of blessing was done in the past, it continues into the present, and will continue in the future. In other words, God has made Mary the most blessed among women for all time, and so we refer to her as the ever-Blessed Virgin Mary. Incidentally, Gabriel’s greeting to Mary when he gave her the great news that began with the words, “Hail, thou full of grace,” the verb meaning ‘full of grace’ (κεχαριτωμένη) is also in the perfect participle form signifying that God made her full of grace from her beginning and throughout all time. Sorry for the grammar lesson, but it is important information to know in order to capture the profound importance of who Mary is and her role in our salvation as the Mother of God.

We venerate Mary because she *is* the Mother of God. From the very earliest days of the Christian Church, Mary has been venerated. From the days the early church Mary was considered the first among all the saints. In the year 431, the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (a city in modern-day Turkey) declared Mary as the *theotokos*, or ‘God-bearer.’ Because she bore him in her womb, that makes her the mother of him whom she bore. She provided the womb and supplied the genetic material for God to become human in the person of Jesus. We know that Jesus is God-incarnate, the Word made flesh, and one of the persons of the one, holy and undivided Trinity. We also know that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Therefore, Mary is the Mother of God, because it is through Mary that Jesus received his humanity. That does not mean that she is older than God; that does not mean that she is the source of his divinity or was at the Creation. (You didn’t miss something from the story in Genesis.) Mary gave birth to a person, and that person also happened also to be God.

As for her Dormition and Assumption, the details around her death and what happened to her afterward are a mystery and not specifically recorded in scripture. But, from the earliest days of the Church, it was understood that Mary’s mortal fate was like that of

the rest of humanity. According to Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, those “who sleep in death” and have “fallen asleep” before the second coming and await the resurrection of the dead (1 Thess 4:13); that would suggest her dormition, or falling asleep. The Church has also taught since ancient times that at the moment of her conception, she was granted by God the grace to be free of original sin (that is the sin of the Fall of Adam and Eve), the result of which is corruption of the body. There are apocryphal writings by early Church Fathers that claim that the apostles were present when Mary died and that when St. Thomas asked to have her tomb opened, she was not there. Since, according to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John only he who descended from the Father would ascend back to the Father, it was presumed that she did not ascend into Heaven, but was assumed. Wherever, you might fall regarding this specific mystery, we still know that Mary had a special place in the heart of God.

We believe this because Mary humbly accepted God’s invitation and call to be the bearer of Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. She showed incredible faith in the Almighty and faithfulness to him when she said, “Yes,” to God. She was an unmarried teenage girl who risked shame and rejection by her family

and community in order to fulfill God's purpose for her. What a risk! That kind of faithfulness takes incredible strength and courage, but she accepted the challenge. God knew she would and he knew she was courageous enough to do it and do it well. Elizabeth also took a big risk. Since Mary was unmarried; she defied a major social norm, but Elizabeth not only accepted her, but also praised her, in her proclamation of Mary as ever-blessed, for what she had agreed to do, despite what the family or the community might say. Mary was an ordinary young girl who accepted an extraordinary task. Elizabeth, herself, defied social expectations, too. In a society where a woman's greatest purpose was believed to be the bearing of children, Elizabeth had probably faced a lifetime of social rejection for having borne no children, a situation that would be reversed in her old age. Mary should have been married, but she trusted God, and by her visitation to Elizabeth, she trusted Elizabeth, who accepted her and welcomed her with the same inclusive love that Jesus would eventually show to many who didn't fit society's mold. So often in Scripture God used the most unexpected people to work out his purpose in the world. Think about Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Peter, Paul, Elizabeth, Mary, Paul, and many others. And God can use unexpected people like you and me, too!

It is this aspect of Mary's story that resonates the most for us. Mary is the highest example of how God can do the most extraordinary things with the most ordinary people. God can use any one of us for his purpose, no matter where we've come from, what we've done, who we've been, God can interrupt our lives to allow his plan to unfold. The most important and basic thing that we can do is humbly accept God's invitation. God saw in Mary such overwhelming potential to accept his invitation with humility, that he trusted her and conferred his grace upon her to be the vessel by which the divine would become human. In so doing, she became the Mother of God-incarnate. As you think about the story of Mary, ask yourself, "How and where is God using me today?" Pray and listen to how God might be calling you to work out his purpose in the world. There are so many ways in which we can all participate in furthering God's desire for a better world: there is much work to be done here among us as the community of God's people—the church—and there is much work to be done for God's people and creation out in the world. Put away all anxiety, anger, and confusion; there's no time for that. Where is God calling you to be, and will you say, "Yes," to him when he does?

Mary matters because she *is* the most blessed among women for all time, she is the Mother of God, and she humbly accepted God's call to her. In our own experience, she is an example to us that ordinary folk like us can participate in the work of God, and that if we remain faithful to him, we will, like Mary, some day enjoy eternal happiness with him. Thank God for Mary and her example to us. How will you say, "Yes," to God today? Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Amen.

Resources

"Commentary on Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)" in *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723

"Mary, Mother of God," <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/mary-mother-of-god>

"The Dormition of Mary," <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-dormition-of-mary.html>

"The Assumption of Mary: A Belief since Apostolic Times," <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/AOFMARY.HTM>