**“As a mother comforts”**

**a sermon by Rev. Julianne Porras-Center to Trinity Presbyterian Church**

 **May 12, 2024**

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
**47**    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
**48**for God has looked on the humble estate of God’s servant.
    For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
**49**for God who is mighty has done great things for me,
    and holy is God’s name.
**50**And God’s mercy is for those who fear God
    from generation to generation.
**51**God has shown strength with God’s arm;
    God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
**52**God has brought down the mighty from their thrones
    and exalted those of humble estate;
**53**God has filled the hungry with good things,
    and the rich God has sent away empty.
**54**God has helped God’s servant Israel,
    in remembrance of God’s mercy,
**55**as God spoke to our fathers,
    to Abraham and to God’s offspring forever.”

For thus says the Lord:
I will extend prosperity to her like a river
    and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream,
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm
    and bounced on her knees.
**13**As a mother comforts her child,
    so I will comfort you;
    you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

Happy Mother’s Day!

Happy day to mothers, to people born of mothers – that’s all of you. Happy day to people who have served as mothers to children not biologically their own. Happy day to people raised by a mother or a mother figure or a proud village of women. Happy day to those whose mothers are no longer in our lives, for a variety of reasons. And happy day to my mother – who I think might be watching on Zoom. I love you!

Mother’s Day is an incredibly sacred day in which we honor and cherish and celebrate the *perhaps the least thanked and appreciated demographic*. And in the church world, the field of Biblical Studies, as we come together to study this ancient text that continues to be a living document, well I think Mother’s Day is an especially sacred day.

It’s special because it’s basically just Women’s Day – because most of the women, and there aren’t all that many — who made it into the Bible, they are in there for their role as mothers. Now that is an incredibly important role for many women today, but in Biblical times, it was also just about the only role for women.

And so in honor of this, I want to talk a little bit about the most important woman in the Bible. You read it in the bulletin. “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom, Let it Be.”

Mother Mary. I want to talk about Mother Mary because this is church, and I want to talk about love, and what love is there that is greater than motherly love? We talk a lot about fatherly love in church, but as we read in our first scripture passage, God also identifies as a mother. We are told with the beautiful imagery of the Prophet Isaiah that when Jerusalem comes, when this symbolic fulfillment of the Kingdom of heaven arrives, we shall nurse and be carried on God’s arm and bounced on her knees.

“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” proclaims the Lord through prophet Isaiah.

You shall be comforted. And our earthly mothers have an incredibly sacred role in that plan of God.

Many scholars believe that it is because so many of us, myself included, have such wonderful mothers that we can long for the Kingdom of Heaven, this prophecy – because unless we have known love, how can we long for it? Learning about the unique character of motherly love helps us to understand better just how deeply God loves us.

But its not just this fringe Bible verse that ties God’s love to motherly love. It’s throughout. The philosopher Erich Fromm in his groundbreaking book “The Art of Loving” wrote that the promised land – the Jerusalem proclaimed by Isaiah – represents in Biblical thought the ideal of motherly love, this ideal being unconditional in nature. When the prophets write of seeking out the land of milk and honey they are desiring a return to and an ideal of motherly love. Milk, for Fromm is a “symbol of the first aspect of motherly love, that of care and affirmation” that it is good to be alive, that life will nourish you with mother’s milk, so you can grow. Honey symbolizes “the sweetness of life, the love for it and the happiness in being alive.”

He writes that good mothers represent both of these things. That it’s not just about making sure the child reaches 18 with all or most of the limbs they started with – phew! – but about instilling within them the love of life.

Now, I have a very fun-loving mother, who woke us up early on Snow days to go sledding and eat Lucky Charms cereal. So rest assured, I was fed not just milk, but honey.

So if we follow Fromm’s logic, then anytime we talk about the land of milk and honey, our longing for it, we are talking about the motherly love of God.

But there’s a problem. The land may be symbol of a mother, but I don’t want to learn about motherhood from some symbol. I want to learn about it from a woman – the same way I come to Jesus to learn about what it means to be a child of God – to be human and divine, to live and thrive in a broken and bleeding world. That’s why we have an incarnational theology -- because God values flesh and blood examples. I want to come to Mary to learn what it means to be a woman, to be a mother maybe someday, but also to be someone’s daughter, to be a child of God.

But there’s another problem, as a Protestant Christian, Mother Mary has never come to me like she came to John Lennon and Paul MacCartney. I don’t know her. She is not a part of my worship, as I know she is to many of my Catholic friends. She’s not a part of my story or my culture, as she is to so many Latine or Hispanic people who venerate the Virgen de Guadalupe. I have looked at art depicting Madonna and Child, at Virgenes painted in my community in Watsonville, and Virgencitas worn by my closest friends, and longed to feel something ---

longed as a young woman, to see an ideal of who I ought to grow into in the Bible.. Longed for a spiritual mother, because sometimes, a Heavenly father isn’t really what I want. Longed for someone to whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

And as we are all children of mothers, or long to be, I suspect you do too.

And so I will let you in on a little bit of my sermon-writing technique, my worship style, honestly the way that I engage with the divine. I love to ask questions – only rarely do they lead to answers, but always they lead to greater knowledge about myself and my relationship to the divine. And the question that has been dogging me for weeks now – since a dear friend a spiritual mentor recommended I listen to this song in a time of trouble, and since, I felt no comfort at all hearing the name Mother Mary sung – is

Who – who is Mary? Who is this person that my particular faith tradition has so overlooked – much like mothers are so overlooked come to think of it.

And maybe the better question, who is Mary to me?

And I want to share three instances in the story of Mary that have given me a new and deeper respect for and resonance with Mother Mary, that have helped me, and I hope you, to see God in a new light, and which have comforted me as a mother might.

And the first is simply her introduction in the book of Luke – the Gospel, which as some of us talked about yesterday, is revolutionary for its embrace and inclusion of women characters and their voices, and which carries this attention to and care for the marginalized class of women to its theology.

Mary is introduced as young Jewish woman – some think perhaps as young as 13 – who lived in first century Palestine and who was engaged to an older man named Joseph. She was an average young woman when something remarkable happened.

An angel appeared. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” the angel said. And Mary was, as Luke writes, “perplexed.” She “pondered” what sort of greeting this might be. And those two words alone tell me more about this character of Mary than anything else. She was thoughtful. Pondering. Marveling. I think I would have liked her.

We know what happens next. The angel tells her “Do not fear,” then goes on to tell her something incredibly fearsome: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.”

In response, the thoughtful and perplexed young woman asks a question I think anyone would ask “How? How can this be?” This is a question, by the way, which many, many theologians and Biblical scholars have chided Mary for – have used as evidence for her lack of faith – how dare she question the authority of an angel of God, how dare she doubt God’s ability to do the impossible!

And yet, it is relatable. It is natural. Indeed, it is brave. It is one of those things that makes me feel like I can understand Mary, *because* she sought to understand.

And though the angel does a poor job explaining, and the church had to step in with a centuries worth of theories to fill in that gap, Mary replies to this angel “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Let it be.

With those words, and yet not without asking questions, Mary accepts her fate. I hear the echo of Jesus’ words in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Nevertheless not my will, but thy will be done,” and I hear the echo of the words we pray so often, the words Jesus taught us to pray “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

I hear her tell me to surrender to the blessings and challenges of life – knowing the risk, knowing certainly that if Joseph divorced her as he indeed planned, she could be stoned, left derelict as an unmarried and shamed woman – and yet trusting God’s will. Knownig the risks and yet trusting God’s will, letting it become her own.

Let it be with me according to your word.

This is the great Spiritual lesson. And this is not the end of Mary’s story.

This is only the beginning.

The second instance is our second scripture passage, which I know some of you studied this morning, the Magnificat. This poem, this song, this manifesto of sorts is spoken by Mary when she visits her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John. These two mothers share a moment in which they recognize the incredible power and blessedness of their positions as mothers, and then Mary says the longest line of dialogue spoken by a woman anywhere in the New Testament.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
**47**    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
**48**for God has looked on the humble estate of God’s servant.
    For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
**49**for God who is mighty has done great things for me,
    and holy is God’s name.
**50**And God’s mercy is for those who fear God
    from generation to generation.
**51**God has shown strength with God’s arm;
    God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
**52**God has brought down the mighty from their thrones
    and exalted those of humble estate;
**53**God has filled the hungry with good things,
    and the rich God has sent away empty.
**54**God has helped God’s servant Israel,
    in remembrance of God’s mercy,
**55**as God spoke to our fathers,
    to Abraham and to God’s offspring forever.”

And we could study this for hours, but you all have Mothers Day brunches to attend, and so I want to highlight just two things.

First, I want to highlight the profoundly intimate and personal power of Mary’s relationship with God. Her soul magnifies the Lord – it does not merely reflect it, or bear witness to it. No, it magnifies it – makes brighter, more intense, brings closer. We all have this power when we choose to stop wrestling with God in the deepest part of our souls and instead choose to surrender as Mary did – we become no longer mere vessels for God, but instruments of God. This suggests that when we, like Mary, say ‘let it be,’ our spirits, tired from running from God’s will, can at last rest and even rejoice because they are comforted as a mother comforts.

Two, the Magnificat suggests that to be a mother, to bring a child into this world, is not just a personal decision, but the beginning of a truly prophetic, political, revolutionary, even global act. To bring a person into this world is to decide that this world is worth living in. It is to take an interest in the state of the world, to advocate for justice and safety and goodness within the world, to declare that people in general, and this child in particular could be good for the world, and that the world could be good for them.

Afterall, this manifesto preached by Mary could be read as a mission statement for the whole social program of the Kingdom of Heaven, the whole thrust of the radical and transformative love of God. God will bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift up those of humble estate. God will fill the hungry with good things and will send the rich away empty. God will actively alter the status quo of the dominant power structures of the world to uplift the poor and vulnerable.

Notice here that Mary doesn’t actually say that God “will do these things” but that God **has done them.** It is finished. She is speaking justice into existence, just as she is carrying a life force which will work towards this justice, and so she is taking on the role of the prophet.

I humbly submit to you that to be a mother is to be a prophet.

It is to change the world.

And the third instance that helped me to know Mary and so to know a bit more about God’s motherly and unconditional love for all of us is when that prophecy Mary spoke in the Magnificat came to fruition – when that little child the angel told her would come began his ministry with his first miracle and so began to take the world by storm.

And I want to read just these first few verses from the second chapter of John, because so little conveys so much.

John 2:1-7

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. **2**Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. **3**When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” **4**And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” (sons, amiright?)

**5**His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

**6**Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. **7**Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.

And we know what happens next – the water was turned to wine – good wine, wine which might reflect the honey of life, the sweetness of life -- the party went on, Jesus lived just three years more and then his mother mourned him.

But what does this little bit of dialogue teach us about Mary, about the nature of God, about motherhood?

Well, it tells us that even the Son of God had to listen to his mother.

So happy Mother’s Day to all you moms out there. May you continue to ask questions, to model surrender even at great sacrifice, to magnify the Lord, to prophecy and advocate for a better world for your children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, and to know exactly what needs doing and when.

And may the rest of us, like Jesus, first, listen,

second, comply,

and third, continue to be comforted if not by our own mothers, then by the loving hand of God, and so love life enough to transform our world. Amen.