

Delivered at Plymouth Church of Shaker Heights, U.C.C.

“Mary Who? – Theotokos”

**Isaiah 7:10-17**

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup>The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.’

**Romans 1: 1-7**

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup>which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, <sup>3</sup>the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup>and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup>through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, <sup>6</sup>including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

7 To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Gospel according to Matthew is believed to have been written after the Gospel of Mark. For all but 60 verses of Mark appear in Matthew. It is believed to have been written in Galilee or Antioch in Syria. It was in Galilee that followers of a Pharisaic party and early Jewish followers of Jesus would have interacted and clashed. The occasionally highly charged language is best understood within the inter-Jewish conflict. The Gospel of Matthew highlights the Jewish origin and identity of Jesus and his first followers more than any other

piece of early Christian literature.

For two Sundays the question of who Jesus is has been answered by John the Baptist: “the one to come” and “he who is mightier than I” (3:11). Now Matthew in four stories expands on that answer: Jesus is descended from Abraham and David (1:1-17); Jesus is the child of the virgin Mary, wife of Joseph (1:18-25); Jesus is king of the Jews and hope of the nations (2:1-12); Jesus is God’s Son called out of Egypt (2:13-23). Today we focus on Jesus’ Mother – Mary.

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## **Matthew 1: 18-25**

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup>‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts,

Be acceptable to you O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Mary who? - Theotokos. In the sermon title this morning, I’ve given you both the question, and the answer. Yet I’ve given you the answer in Greek, so that most of you would have to keep listening to get the answer translated.

When that great day comes that Jesus returns, He is going to ask all of the Catholics to wait to one side and then He’ll turn and address all of the Protestants. And I believe the first thing He’ll say is: Why have you been so mean to my Mama?

After the fervor of the reformers so many years ago, Protestants began to get rid of anything in their worship that seemed even slightly Papal or Catholic, among which was speaking of Mary in anyway but a passing reference. If the people of the reformation could have conceived of raising a child in an artificial womb, I think they would have rewritten the scriptures to get rid of Mary all together. Isn’t it amazing that such an unassuming young girl, poor by birth and upbringing, could

be so alarming?

Theotokos, literally translated means – “God-bearer” But more commonly translated – “Mother of God.” The use of this title appears in writings preserved from as early as 320 C.E. Even before Mary was banished from the Protestant Church, she caused quite a stir in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The controversy over the true nature of Christ, brought about the argument over the use of the title Theotokos, to describe His mother. For ‘God-bearer’ specifically relates to Jesus form at and preceding His birth. The disagreement regarding Mary’s position culminated at the Third General Council held in Ephesus in 431 C.E. Saint Cyril of the See of Alexandria challenged Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople. They differed on their view of the person of Jesus. Nestorius was of the school of Antioch, which placed emphasis on the humanness of Jesus. The imbalance was such that they bordered on saying that two separate entities existed in one body a human personality and the divine Word. With all this madness, is it any wonder Mary didn’t throw her hands up and leave the Church all by her self way back then?

Let’s continue our journey back in time and return to the source, it is about the year 1 B.C.E. The place is a city in Galilee, called Nazareth. A teenage girl sits quietly in her room, the sweet smell of olive blossoms lingers upon the breeze, her mind is filled with thoughts of her betrothed Joseph, about their wedding day, their life together, and all of the exciting things of which a young girl dreams. And out of no where a messenger of God, an angel, appears in her room, piercing the silence saying, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The angel goes on to tell her that she will conceive and bear a son. And she questions, how can this be, for she is a virgin. And the angel explains that this will not be just any son, but the Son of God. “For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” With today’s genetic research and cloning studies, I have no trouble believing God placed God’s own perfect genetic code into an egg within Mary and she conceived without sexual contact.

And Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary with trust and faith in God - said yes! In the grace of God Mary made a free and conscious choice and said yes! By saying let it be done as you have spoken. Mary gave up any chance of having a quote end quote normal life. She was taking incredible risks in the unknown. How do you tell your betrothed? –and I use betrothed rather than fiancé, in that betrothal was a legally binding contractual relationship, to break it required a divorce and should the man die, the woman would be considered a widow. How do you tell your betrothed that you’ve been faithful to him, but you just happen to be pregnant? He by all rights could have refused to marry her and had her tried as an adulterer. Societal customs would have forced her own father to banish her from their home. She faced the possibility of being not only poor, but abandoned on the street and pregnant, if not put to death.

Mary accepts unseen realities. She realizes, how ever vaguely, that the salvation and restoration of all humanity and creation depends upon her child. She had the hope and faith that God could and

would do the impossible, and she said yes. In some ways Mary was no different than any Jewish Mother today, for she believed her son was perfect and on top of that God's gift to the world.

Many Protestants would like to think Mary was nothing more than a puppet and had to do what God said, that way you can ignore her. But what does that viewpoint say of God or our relationship to God? We must never forget – she could have said “No!”

Nicholas Cabasilas a Greek Orthodox priest expresses it this way. The incarnation was not only the work of the Father, by God's power and by God's Spirit, but it was the will and faith of the Virgin. With out the consent of Mary, with out the agreement of her faith, the plan was as unrealized as it would have been with out the intervention of the three divine persons themselves. It was only after having instructed her and her saying “yes” that God received her as mother and borrowed from her the flesh that she so greatly wished to lend God.

This is in stark contrast to the gods of Greek Mythology, who tricked or out-right raped human women to bring forth their children. Just as God was becoming incarnate voluntarily, so God wished that the one who would conceive the Christ should bear Him freely and with her full consent.

The Orthodox see this as a vital aspect of God's plan for salvation. For just as Adam and Eve in freedom broke covenant with God and brought forth brokenness and separation, Mary in her freedom obeyed God's will bearing the Savior of all. I'd like to quote from the Orthodox book of worship:

O Theotokos, thou art a mystical paradise,  
who untilled hast brought forth Christ.  
He has planted upon earth the life-giving tree of the cross:  
therefore we worship Him and thee do we magnify.

Today the death that came to humanity  
through the eating of the tree,  
is made of no effect through the cross.  
For the curse of our mother Eve that fell on all humanity  
is destroyed by the fruit of the pure Mother of God,  
whom all the powers of heaven magnify.

The Orthodox so beautifully weave together the first creation story with the new creation in Christ. They do not presume to worship Mary, or to place her equal to God. But hold her up as a symbol of hope and faith, and of God's unfathomable power and love. Mary is not praised for her divineness, but quite the contrary, she is praised for her responsiveness to God in the fullness and freedom of her humanness. God chose a simple common girl to bear the Christ child, the Saviour of all humanity and creation, and in faith she said yes. And in doing so she changed the course of history for all time. No more would humanity be separated from God, but would know, Immanuel—God with us, in human flesh.

Each day we have the opportunity to say “yes” or “no” to God’s will and purpose in our lives. We are all called to be “God-bearers.” We are not called to physically bear the Christ child, but we are called to be Christ’s hands, feet, voice, and love, in the world today. We do this by being faithful to whom God has uniquely created each of us to be. Not whom others would have you be, but daily discern whom God is calling you to be.

In this season pregnant with anticipation and each day that follows what will you say? Mary was willing to depend upon God. And such receptivity to God inevitably brings forth new life. This task often involves risk or pain. Mary—as well as all of those willing to trust God –recognizes the reality and potential of suffering and blends it with hope. The travail necessary to give birth – whether it be to a child, to an empowered congregation, a new identity, or a better place for people to live –can not be undertaken with out such hope. And just as God answered Mary's - yes - with new life, and continually supported her upon the journey upon which that answer took her, so will God guide and bless you. But it is your choice.

We will celebrate Christmas in two days, because a mere teenage girl, nearly two thousand years ago, when presented with the impossible, believed that “nothing” is impossible with God. What will tomorrow hold for you, for your loved ones, for this city, for this world, because of your answer to God this day?

Blessed art thou, holy Virgin Mary,  
for thou didst nourish the Christ  
who nourishes us with His kindness and abundant mercy!  
Blessed art thou, O Virgin for thou didst carry in thy hands  
Him that made us free from the sin and iniquity of the Devil!  
Blessed art thou, nourishing Him with thy chaste milk!  
O Queen and resting place of the King!  
O cooing white dove,  
cooing to thy Son in the morning!

Amen.