“Mothers of God” – Advent 4, Dec 18

Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Scripture: Luke 11:27-28; Matt 12:46-50

Did the woman say,

When she held him for the first time in the dark of a stable,

After the pain and the bleeding and the crying,

“This is my body, this is my blood”?

Did the woman say,

When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,

After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,

“This is my body, this is my blood”?

I’ve lived with this poem by Frances Croake Frank for several years now, as Kris and I have become parents. I keep coming back to its powerful articulation of Mary’s experience of giving birth, paralleled with the crucifixion; and both are described with Jesus’ Communion-evoking refrain: “This is my body, this is my blood.” Don’t these words make so much sense when spoken by a mother? Her child is literally her body and blood, knit together in her womb, and brought to birth in this world through her labour, her blood, sweat, and tears.

And yet, it is also jarring to remember that in most Christian churches, women do not utter these words, as they cannot preside at Communion. These words are therefore seldom uttered by women, even less often by women who are mothers. Perhaps in part because of this, we are not accustomed to viewing mothering – especially the rawness of birth in a stable – as something sacred, on par with the cross, that central symbol of our Christian tradition. Yet here they are, poignantly placed side by side.

As Anabaptist-Mennonites – spiritual heirs of the Radical Reformers – we have a somewhat complicated relationship with Mary. Like other Protestants, we’re not sure what to do with her. In a book of Protestant perspectives on Mary, Kathleen Norris writes, “The [Episcopal] church in which I was raised had a curious attitude toward Mary, an odd mixture of hubris and bashfulness. We dragged Mary out at Christmas, along with the angels, and placed her at centre stage. Then we packed her safely in the crèche box for the rest of the year. We effectively denied Mary her place in Christian tradition and were disdainful of the reverence displayed for her, so public and emotional, by many millions of Catholics around the world. . . . Mary was mysterious, and therefore for Catholics; our religion was more proper, more masculine.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The consequence is that “We have neither blessed Mary nor allowed her to bless us”[[2]](#footnote-2) – a reference to Mary’s song in Luke 1, where she affirms that “from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

But what could it mean to bless Mary and for her to bless us? After all, what’s so unusual about pregnancy and mothering? We tend to think of these as the most ordinary roles, roles that come naturally to women, which happen to them quite passively, which are somewhat idealized. But my opening poem suggested something quite different – it held up labour, birth, and mothering as, difficult labours of love, courageous acts of faith. So what is going on here?

Some time into his ministry, in Luke 11, Jesus has an encounter which is often understood as downplaying Mary’s importance, and the importance of mothers more generally. An unnamed woman calls out to him when he is preaching and teaching in a crowd – ‘“Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”’ (Luke 11:27-28). We tend to read this as a as a contrast between mothering and discipleship, or between the physical body and the spirit. Jesus seems to “set up a contrast between true believers and his mother.” But is the distinction meant to be so stark? One commentator writes, “the distinction doesn’t hold up . . . in view of the positive way Luke presents Mary in all other scenes of his gospel.” After all, Elizabeth greets Mary with the words, “Blessed is she who believed” – a reference to Mary’s “yes” to God’s plan for her to mother the Messiah.[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, these are two sides of the same coin – Mary’s choice to be the mother of Jesus IS an act of faith, her contribution to God’s redemptive plan. This is why some traditions go so far as to name her the first disciple.

So what does it mean for Mary’s mothering and faith to be blurred together in this way? For one thing, it reminds us that faith, like mothering, is profoundly embodied – perhaps even alarmingly embodied! I can say from experience that pregnancy and birth are not for the faint of heart. When I was pregnant with our son Simon, the physical changes my body underwent were more drastic than I was expecting; it takes a lot for a body to adjust to accommodate – to house – another body within the same skin. By the end, it becomes something of a literal burden! But alongside these changes, I found myself learning from my pregnant body: learning to turn my attention toward another, toward that tiny image of God growing within me. Ordinary acts of caring for oneself – eating well, a daily walk, sleeping enough, not overworking – became ethical, generous acts of loving another as oneself. In this sense, in pregnancy, I existed in a liminal space between being a mother and not being one yet, of being one person and yet two – and I remember making a joke along these lines at a church meeting during that time – I asked, does my vote count as one person or two? Though we have not all experienced mothering ourselves, we can agree that “[e]very person born into the world has known the hospitality of a woman’s body.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This is something we can learn from our mothers’ bodies, including Mary’s.

Mary’s willingness to share her body with God in this way – her thoroughly embodied faith – thus reminds us that our faith is not other-worldly or idealized, but profoundly this-worldly. Our tradition begins with a moment of incarnation – of God becoming flesh, of God entering the fray of human history, which Mary’s body makes possible as she bears and births God. Mennonite theologian Malinda Berry talks about Mary as “the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God, meaning that God is, from the beginning, embodied in “woman’s body as well as a man’s.” This means that “God’s revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women.” So although Mary’s experiences of pregnancy and mothering were in some ways unique, they also were much like any other experience: they were messy, painful, hard work, carried out in poverty and under the dangers of Roman occupation – and yet brought much joy and hope into that very context. This is the paradox mothers live with – that their experiences are so ordinary, and yet connect them with the sacred, life-giving power of the God of Life. The experience of mothering is ordinary, this-worldly, and yet miraculous. Thus, our respect for Mary’s choice to mother Jesus spills over into an affirmation of the experiences of women who undertake mothering, who commit to a lifelong relationship with their child or children, who say yes to God’s call to give and nourish life. With Mary, we can say that those experiences are sacred – are blessed.

But you might be wondering whether mothering is really the best image here. After all, I wouldn’t want to claim that all women are meant to be mothers, that this is some mandatory role for us! It is certainly not a universal experience, not even among women. And not all mothers experience pregnancy and birth, either, as some say “yes” to that calling through adoption. As Berry clarifies, “I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God’s self-disclosure!” But there is sacredness in Mary’s pregnancy and participation in “the struggle of God’s self-disclosure being birthed in this world” that convey to us “new life and new meaning when so much militates against it.”[[5]](#footnote-5) So Mary’s mothering of God, alongside the experiences of other mothers, carries a symbolic or cultural weight as well. A pregnant woman represents hope in an undeniably powerful way. Think of Isaiah’s famous prophecy: at a time when the Israelites are facing war, facing death, violence, destruction, and fear, Isaiah simply foretells that “‘A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and will call him Emmanuel [God with us]’ (7:14).”

Taiwanese theologian C.S. Song points out how remarkable this is: “In that critical time of the nation, Isaiah did not point to the fortification, to the armaments, to the troops, but to a pregnant woman (or pregnant women) as the sign of God’s deliverance.” He concludes that the redemptive hope and power that new life brings allows us to “believe in the victory of love over hate, life over death.”[[6]](#footnote-6) So while mothering is this profoundly embodied experience for many women, it also carries symbolic – or rather, theological – weight, which makes its significance more universal, not limited to those who are literally mothers.

Interestingly, Jesus also uses the imagery of mothering to speak about *all* of his disciples. In Matthew 12, he has another somewhat perplexing encounter with his mother and siblings. We read:

46While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. 47Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” 48But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” 49And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 50For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matt. 12:46-50)

Again, this can be read as a stark contrast – as Jesus rejecting his mother and siblings, replacing them with a new, spiritual family of disciples. Yet we know from elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus remained connected to his mother. In the Gospel of John, he even speaks to her from the cross, making sure she has an adoptive son to care for her in her old age, after he’s gone. So here Jesus is not rejecting his family, but redefining it, broadening it to include everyone who does the will of God.

So this, in part, is what we can learn from Mary’s maternal, embodied faith: that faith requires our whole selves, body and spirit. That mothering is one among many ways in which we answer our call to hear the word of God and to obey it, to do the will of God, to choose the ways of life and love in this world of death and violence. We are all called to commit ourselves to incarnating or embodying God, to making God present through our love as part of the Body of Christ. As we claim one another as a broadened family of faith, we can insist, with Mary: “This is my body. This is my blood.” And in this way, as one medieval mystic put it, “we are all meant to be mothers of God” (Meister Eckhart).

AMEN

1. Kathleen Norris, “Foreword” in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa amd Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xi-xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gaventa and Rigby, eds., “Introduction,” in *Blessed One*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 247-248. A similar contrast between birth and “new birth” in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:3-6) is thoughtfully challenged in: Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “The Agony and Ecstasy of Baptism,” *Sojourners*, accessed April 27, 2016, https://sojo.net/biography/natalie-wigg-stevenson. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Doris Jean Dyke, *Crucified Woman* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Malinda E. Berry, “A Theology of Wonder,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. C.S. Song, “Oh, Jesus, Here with Us,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 134-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)