

*“Mary the Prophet”*  
*A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas*  
*21 December 2008*  
*2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 + Luke 1:46-55 + Romans 16:25-27 + Luke 1:26:38*

We come today to the fourth of our Advent prophets, Mary. Like Nicholas, that dangerously powerful embodiment of the father archetype whom we’ve reduced to a pipe-smoking Jolly Old St. Nick; and like that fearsome wild man, John the Baptist, whom we’ve made about as unsettling as a lovably eccentric bachelor uncle, the temptation to remake Mary for our own convenience is persistent and pervasive.

That’s because Mary, as a woman, pushes Christianity’s biggest button, which the Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin describes so memorably as its “dreadfully masculinized Godhead.” We’ve tried to compensate. Using a variety of strategies we’ve sought to feminize the godhead. We have embraced the few isolated passages in the Bible that speak of feminine or motherly qualities of God. Many mystics, especially during the Middle Ages, have spoken of Jesus as Mother. And in our time, some have maintained the Holy Spirit should be understood as feminine.

But Mary -- overshadowed by the Most High, and bearing the son of God in her body -- is the woman who has come closest to the Christian godhead, the one who carries the most Divine Feminine energy. Indeed, in the early days of Christianity, the church implicitly connected her to the goddess when it converted many of the pagan goddess shrines into Marian shrines or churches.

In subsequent centuries, Mary became the object of great popular piety, appearing to her followers in countless visits around the world – from Fatima to Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Hillside. Along the way, she has sparked devotion so great that in 1950, based on the “sense of the faithful,” Pope Pius XII declared it an infallible dogma

that, at her death, Mary, free from original sin, was assumed body and soul into heaven.

There, as Queen of Heaven, she reigns with Christ the King. That dogma is so familiar we usually don't notice that the royal incestuous couple motif, an image that recurs in many ancient religions, is also bedrock Christian orthodoxy.

Given this complex-ridden problem with the feminine NOT in the godhead, our temptation with Mary is usually to over-value or under-value her. Either way, patriarchal Christianity, like patriarchal anything, is careful to confine the feminine and the female.

As representative of the spiritual feminine, orthodox Christianity cloisters Mary into an image of the eternal **Yes** to the masculine God, limiting her role to wife and especially Mother. As example of the earthly female, generations of flesh and blood women have been encouraged to echo her eternal **Yes** to the masculine God – now come down to earth in the form of fathers and husbands.

Masculine vanity aside, the human husband is a long way from the masculine God, and Mary is much more than Mother. So on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, let's see if we can ponder her with a vision both ancient and new, born at once of her time and our own.

Let's begin in the first chapter of Luke. Not with today's gospel passage, the Annunciation. That tells of Mary's encounter with the male godhead, in the form of the angel Gabriel. It's an important encounter and we'll come back to it, but first let's look at some verses on either side of it, especially the Visitation between Mary and Elizabeth.

When we do, we are reminded that sometimes the best thing men can do for women is to shut up. You may remember that just before Mary's encounter with Gabriel, Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth and a priest of the Temple, had his own encounter with the angel.

Zechariah, unlike Mary, questioned the good news Gabriel brought: that Elizabeth soon would bear him a son. Gabriel responded by rendering the priest mute for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. And so, the male voice silenced, two women meet – and sing. *Blessed are you among women*, sings Elizabeth to Mary, *and blessed is the fruit of your womb*.

Where her husband had focused on himself, asking Gabriel, *How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years*, Elizabeth looks beyond herself to celebrate the goodness and wonder of the Other, singing with joy of Mary and the child she carries.

Mary responds with her magnificent hymn, the Magnificat, magnificent because as Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached, *It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung...It is...a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world...These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth*.

Wow! What powerful words. Yet they brought me up short. I think quite a bit about the Old Testament prophets – the books of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others are among my favorite books of the Bible – but I give little thought to the *women* prophets of the Old Testament. I'll bet the same is true for most of you, and the reason is that they are invisible.

When was the last time you heard the great hymn of Hannah – on which Mary’s words are clearly based -- proclaimed in church on a Sunday? If you’ve spent your life in any of the liturgical churches, which follow a three year cycle of readings known as a lectionary, the answer is never. None of the major lectionaries includes it.

When we hear Mary singing in those tones, with those women, she’s a long way from the patriarchal choir. The Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson agrees with Bonhoeffer and notes the Magnificat portrays *intense conflict*. *The six central verbs that describe God’s help to Israel denote forceful action: show strength, scatter, pull down, lift up, fill up, send away.*

This Mary is far removed from the sweet, tender, sentimental Mother of patriarchal Christianity – not that there’s anything wrong with that Mary. We all need sweet and tender mothering. But remember: she’s a marginalized teen mother of a people brutalized and oppressed by Roman occupation forces, and so the most important thing about her Magnificat is that she shouts **No** to the proud, the powerful, and the rich; and **Yes** to the tortured, the suffering, the dispossessed, and the poor.

So what does all of this mean for us? Let’s double back to the Annunciation gospel we heard proclaimed today. When we are able to hear this story free of the patriarchal tones of a Mariology that insists on confining Mary to a maternal and subordinate realm, it becomes an Advent paradigm for all of us.

The Annunciation is Mary’s awakening to the Divine Presence, and the Magnificat her song of response to that awakening. Our challenge, like Mary’s, is to be awake to the Divine Presence and, once awakened, to respond. Mary responds in a prophetic voice, with a resounding **No**. That may or may not be the song you are called to sing. Not all are born prophets.

What is most important, however, is that until Mary says **Yes**, the Incarnation cannot occur. That is true for you and for me. Until we say **Yes** -- until we respond to the Divine Presence with our own songs -- God is stymied. God needs us, needs our hearts and hands. The feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether says it better than I can, and so my voice shall go mute as I give her the last word:

*Only through...free human responsiveness to God is God enabled to become the transformer of history. Without such faith, no miracles can happen. When such faith is absent, Christ can do nothing. This is the radical dependence of God on humanity, the other side of our dependence on God, which patriarchal theology has generally denied. Mary's faith makes possible God's entrance into history.*

What will your faith, and mine, make possible?