

What Shall We Call You?

Fourth Advent, 2011

Luke 1:26-38

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May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

For many centuries, the Hebrew people believed that the Messiah would come from the House of David. The writers of the Hebrew scriptures took great care to record the stories of David, of God's anointing him as king, of God's favor to David even when he broke God's law. The liturgists who chose the readings for this last Sunday of Advent—a Sunday we dedicate to Mary, the mother of Jesus—carry on this theme. In the reading from 2nd Samuel, and in Psalm 89, the writers tell us that God has made a covenant with his servant David, and that he will establish David's descendants forever . . . and his throne for all generations. And Luke, of course, assures his readers—though not in as much detail as Matthew—that Joseph was a member of the house of David. Jesus, therefore, is of royal lineage. The relentless will of God, shaped in ancient times, comes to fruition in Nazareth through the power of God's spirit. And there, at the center of the drama, is Mary, an ordinary girl who learns from an angel that she is to be the mother of God. An ordinary girl who becomes a kind of goddess in Christianity, the holy mother who has special access to her son.

When I was in elementary school, we occasionally prayed a long litany to Mary that included marvelous titles for her: Queen of Angels, Star of the Sea, Morningstar, Seat of Wisdom, Gate of Heaven, Tower of Ivory, House of Gold. And the list goes on. What a contrast to calling her Mary—that “grand old name”—or “Miriam,” which was probably her name in Hebrew. Miriam, a simple name, beautiful on the tongue, resonant of an exotic land and time. The tension between this simple name—this simple girl—and the regal names we give her, inspired my lyrics for the anthem that Moonyeen Albrecht and I wrote for this Advent. I know that some of you read them in *The Evangel*, and heard them at Lessons and Carols last week, but I would like to speak them for you:

*O, gentle Mary,
Mother of Jesus,
what shall we call you:
Virgin most humble?*

Star of the Sea?

*In the bleak desert,
cold stars for lamplight,
you cradled the God-child:
Virgin most humble;
Star of the Sea.*

*Shepherds came trembling,
'ere morning star's rising,
to gaze on this mystery,
this child on your knee:
Virgin most humble;
Star of the Sea.*

*Led by a new star,
a trio of wise men
braved cold winter deserts
to honor the God-child
whose birth shone so brightly:
Virgin most humble;
Star of the Sea.*

*Now we too journey
to honor the baby,
to honor the mother,
virgin most humble,
Star of the Sea,
beacon who guides us
to Jesus our brother,
morning star rising
to banish our darkness.*

*Virgin most humble,
Star of the Sea.*

Today is a fragile day. We think about Mary—Miriam—kneeling in wonder before the angel. Mary agreeing to become the mother of the god-child who will be called

Jesus, because he will save God's people from their sins. She had thought she would be marrying Joseph, and that in time they would become parents of children, that they would live a quiet life out of the mainstream of Hebrew society. She never imagined—until Gabriel swooped down on her—that her first-born would be a son especially marked by God to lead God's people into a new kingdom. What a frightening prospect for a young woman! I remember, when I was pregnant with Charlie, trudging off to the bathroom in the middle of the night, wondering what in heaven's name I had gotten myself into. Charlie is 29 now, and I still have those moments when I question the wisdom of bringing a child into such a violent, irrational world.

Perhaps in those first 30 years with Jesus—except that day he stayed behind in Jerusalem, frightening his parents half to death—Mary forgot the ominous message of the angel and simply enjoyed her son, as well as the other children born to her and Joseph. Perhaps, as Jesus worked in the carpenter's shop with Joseph, Mary could almost believe that nothing unusual would happen. But we know the rest of the story: Mary coming to terms with the special power of her son as she asks him to rescue their hosts at the wedding in Cana; Mary, her heart broken, standing with the other women at the foot of the cross.

At the end of this week, we will hear the poetic words of Luke, the sweet telling of the birth of Jesus in the cold, dark stable. We will process into church to the glorious words of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." We will kneel with Mary and Joseph at the manger, wondering at this child who was born to turn the world upside down. But today, I set those poetic images aside and think about Mary, and about all of us who accept God's call to further God's kingdom in this world. I think about the regal titles the Church has given to Mary over the years, titles that cause us to forget the rigors of her life.

Maybe the Church wanted to honor Mary's courage and faithfulness, and so they gave her names fit for a queen. Maybe they needed a female figure to counteract the worship of goddesses. Maybe they needed to offer their people a gentle mediator between them and a distant, forbidding God. And, I confess, I love all those images of Mary: the resplendent Lady of Guadalupe; Mary crushing the serpent's head under her foot; Mary standing on a crescent moon; the weather-worn black Madonnas. But I believe we must keep before us the simplest image of Mary: the young woman bowing to God's will for her. That is the great mystery

and wonder of the Christmas story, that a simple woman from a remote town of no
repute could take a risk that would change the world.

What risks are we willing to take?