

Sermon for the Solemnity of the BVM
Tuesday, August 15, 2023
“Mary: Our Perfect Exemplar”

Text: Luke 1:46-55

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good evening. I bring greetings from just across the East River in Queens, from the people of All Saints Church, Woodhaven. I want to thank Fr. Wood for extending the invitation to preach to you this evening. I know he is unable to be here. I want to thank Fr. Smith and Fr. Jacobson and all of you for your warm welcome thus far. It is truly a pleasure and an honor to speak at this historic place on a holy day that honors your Patron Saint.

You probably know that this particular feast day has multiple names. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, it is the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. In the Western branch of the Church, it is also known as the Feast or Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and in the Eastern branch of the Church it is referred to as the Dormition, or “falling asleep” of Mary. Christians have been celebrating both these events for over 1,000 years. At All Saints, we celebrate both traditions on this day, but we Episcopalians (Anglicans) have often been somewhat non-committal on this.

The Bible tells us that Mary is full of grace and that she is the most blessed woman among women for all time. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary to inform her that she had been chosen by God to bring him into the world in human form, he addressed her by saying, “Hail, thou full of grace. (Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη)” In his greeting, Gabriel declared that she had been endowed by the fullness of God’s grace to be bearer of God in his incarnation to humankind, and that grace would continue for all time. Then, a short time later, she went to meet with her relative, Elizabeth, mother of St. John the Baptist, and upon her arrival, John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” In the way Luke recounted this story, Elizabeth declared that Mary had been blessed by God from her beginning and would continue to be blessed for all time. What the Bible *doesn’t* tell us is what happened to Mary at the end of her days.

Legends early in the church’s history claim that the apostles were present at her death and later when they opened her tomb, her body was not there. It was said that the apostles concluded that her body was taken up to heaven and immediately reunited with her soul. From the earliest days of the church, Mary was considered the Mother of God and the first among all the saints. In the 2nd Century, St. Irenaeus said, “The Virgin Mary, being obedient to [God’s] word, received from an angel the glad tidings that she would bear God.” In the year 431, the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (a city in modern-day Turkey) declared Mary as the *theotokos*, or ‘God-bearer.’ Because she bore him in her womb, that makes her the mother of him whom she bore. And in the 8th Century, St. John of Damascus, considered a doctor on the Assumption said

this: "There was need that the body of her who in childbirth had preserved her virginity intact, be preserved incorrupt after death. There was need that she who had carried her Creator as a babe on her bosom, should linger lovingly in the dwelling of her God. There was need that the bride whom the Father had betrothed to Himself should live in the bridal chamber of Heaven, that she who had looked so closely upon her very own Son on the Cross, and who there felt in her heart the sword-pangs of sorrow which in bearing Him she had been spared, should look upon Him seated with His Father. There was need that God's Mother should enter into her Son's possessions, and as a Mother of God and hand- maid, be revered by all creation."

Mary has clearly been important to the Church for a very long time. And she is important to all of us, too. Now, I have to make a confession: I haven't always been a big fan of Mary! I was brought up a Baptist, and growing up, we didn't pay a whole lot of attention to the Virgin Mary. In fact, the only time I can remember ever hearing mention of the Virgin Mary was around Christmas as baby Jesus's mother. *Maybe*, she'd get a cameo mention around Easter, if we happened to be discussing the Crucifixion, but really, the church I grew up in spent its teaching and preaching energy on the Resurrection, the bare cross, and the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. But as I grew in the faith—and as an Episcopalian in God's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church—I have come to LOVE our Blessed Mother. And what I really came to tell you this evening is that Mary is the perfect exemplar for living the Christian life.

First, Mary was an ordinary human being like you and I. Though sinless and spotless, she was 100% *homo sapiens sapiens*, nonetheless. God entrusted the responsibility of being the mother of his earthly incarnation to an ordinary person. Mary is the highest example of how God can do the most extraordinary things with the most ordinary people. That gives me hope for my own life. God can use any one of us for his purpose, no matter where we've come from, what we've done, who we are or who we've been, God can use us to bring about a change and fulfill his purpose. God can—and does—interrupt our lives in his call to us to be his agents to bring about his kingdom. The most important thing that we can do is humbly accept God's invitation and pray for his assistance to help us carry it out.

That's the second great thing about Mary that makes her our exemplar: she humbly accepted God's invitation and call to be the bearer of Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. She showed incredible faith when she said, "Yes," to God. An unmarried teenage girl, she risked shame and rejection by her family and community in order to fulfill God's purpose for her. What a risk! That kind of faithfulness takes incredible strength and courage, but she accepted the challenge. God calls each and every one of us to *something*. Maybe it's not ordained ministry, but God has a purpose for all of us: perhaps it's to be a good friend or neighbor, perhaps it's to be an advocate for the rights and justice of others, maybe it's to be a good listener or the donor of a meal, maybe it's to be a loving parent or sibling or spouse. Whatever God calls you to, he puts it on your heart or in your mind, and it is up to us to hear him, listen to him, and like Mary, to say, "Yes." And most of all, to put our trust in him to endow us with the grace, gifts, strength, and resolve to carry it out.

And finally, Mary always points us to her son and, thus, to God. I love icons. I have many in my collection. I especially love icons of Blessed Mary. When we look at an icon of Mary holding Jesus or even Mary with Jesus in the center of her chest, our eyes are always drawn to Jesus, by her eyes, by her hands, by the lines drawn by the icon writer. Mary points to Jesus. Every aspect of our lives should point to Jesus. Our conduct, our demeanor, our speech, our actions should reflect our understanding of what our Lord and Savior taught us. Loving God, one another, and ourselves. How to be a community—whatever that means for you. Keeping prayer central in our daily lives, so that we are always in conversation with God as he leads us along our journeys. And praying for others, as Mary so faithfully intercedes on our behalf to God. We, too, should be declaring to the world that “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.”

How is Mary important to you? Has her intercession helped you during a rough time in your life? Does she serve as a loving mother figure for you? Are you inspired by her incredible strength to say, “Yes” to God to be the mother of his Word made flesh, and still endure the pain of watching her son be tortured and crucified? Does she help keep you focused in your desire to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. As we celebrate her holy day, ponder over what Mary means for you.

Mary *is* the most blessed among women for all time, she *is* the Mother of God, she humbly accepted God’s call to her, and she is our wonderful exemplar of how to live a blessed life.

Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Resources

“Commentary on Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)” in *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723

“Mary, Mother of God,” <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/mary-mother-of-god>

“The Dormition of Mary,” <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-dormition-of-mary.html>

“The Assumption of Mary: A Belief since Apostolic Times,” <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/AOFMARY.HTM>

<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/assumption-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary/>

<https://pintpipeandcross.wordpress.com/the-early-church-fathers-on-mary-the-mother-of-god/>