

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 2:21-42 *Mother, Didn't You Know?*

When you think about examples of motherhood in the Bible, you might think of Eve, "the mother of all living;" Rachel, the "mother of the nation;" Hannah, the mother of Samuel; or most likely Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary speaks to us of motherhood, of grace, of faith, of discipleship. Protestants generally do not embrace the later extra-biblical traditions of her immaculate conception, perpetual virginity, bodily assumption into heaven. But whatever truth lies behind these claims, we can agree that Mary has much to teach us about motherhood, faith and discipleship.

1) *Accept God's Call*

The first thing she can teach us is about accepting God's call on your life. As a teenage girl, maybe only 14 years old, she is told that she will conceive and bear a child who will be called "Son of the Most High." Scared by the angel and his message, she nonetheless utters the words of faith: "*Be it unto me according to your will.*" She knows she has been chosen by the grace of God to perform a task that is both true to her nature - she can be a mother - and yet seemingly impossible.

She will not be the last mother to feel that way. But through faith, and the help and reassurance of her family - her husband-to-be Joseph, her older cousin Elizabeth - she grasps what God is calling her to do at this moment, and embraces it. She can be a mother, and she will leave to God to work out the "impossible" parts of her calling. In this she is like all of us: when God calls, she

must answer, she must say yes, she must seek strength and guidance and protection, and she must trust that God knows what he is doing. But Mary already knows enough about God to be able to praise him for his grace to her.

So this is where we begin, as mothers, fathers, or as disciples: listen for God's call, discern what he is asking us to do, and then step out to do it with his help, with trust and faith that he will provide for us. We cannot imagine in the beginning all it will entail, but God has promised to be with us. That promise is often mediated to us over the years through other people: friends, mentors, family, who become channels of God's grace to us.

2) *Do What You Must*

The next thing we learn about Mary is that she does what has to be done. It may seem trivial, or routine, but we never know when God will surprise us in the middle of life's routines and obligations. So Jesus is circumcised and named when he is 8 days old, and later Mary and Joseph present him at the Temple. Little do they know that words of praise and prophecy will greet them, amaze them, hurt them. Simeon and Anna predict that God will use this child in mighty ways in Israel and beyond, but that he will arouse conflict, and Mary herself will feel as though "*a sword has pierced her soul.*"

The family settles into the routine of village life and child-rearing. There are other children, boys and girls, and work to do. But

in all this, Mary and Joseph also attend to Jesus' spiritual development. When he is 12, ready to become a man in the eyes of God at his "bar mitzvah," the family make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. There they meet another surprise. At the end of the visit, the caravan of pilgrims heading home to Galilee is a day's journey north of Jerusalem before his parents realize Jesus is not among them.

It is every parent's nightmare! They rush back to the city and search, and on the third day find their son in the temple in conversation with the scribes. The teachers are amazed at his understanding, but Mary is an anxious mother: *"Where have you been...? How could you do this to us?..."* She is doing what mothers do, and she is right. What she does not expect is her son's answer: *"Mother, didn't you know... I have to be in my Father's house?"*

Mary does not understand what is happening, but she accepts it. She has been anxious over her son, but rather than being angry at his response and treating him as irresponsible, she does what she has done before when she does not understand: *"She treasured all these things in her heart."* Each time she is confronted by something unexpected about her son - angels and shepherds at his birth, words of a prophet at his presentation, his own need to be in "his Father's house" - Mary ponders all she has heard, and treasures it in her heart.

Mary waits for understanding to come. Events are not always transparent, things are not always what they seem at the time, and to store the questions and pray over them before God is something we all need to do - especially if we are parents. So we show our care and concern, do what needs to be done as parents, but we must be prepared for surprises, and not over-react: God may be doing something in our child's life, or in ours, that we need time to understand.

3) Accept Growth

Years later, when we next meet Mary, her son is grown; he has left home and begun his life's work. Already he has a group of followers, and when family and disciples meet at a wedding feast, we can be sure Mary is thrilled to see her son. When the wine runs out at the wedding, she asks him to help. Clearly she already knows he has the power of God upon him, and that she can rely on him to do what is best.

In short, she has learned to trust her son - no easy thing for a mother to do. She still struggles with separation: she *is* his mother and always will be. She approaches him in a motherly way, but his response again surprises her. He does not call her "mother," but with great respect addresses her as he would any woman of her age, something like "dear lady." And he wants to know why she is trying to drag him into the wine fiasco. It is a sign to her that things have changed since he left home: He is independent now, no longer tied to her by obedience. He has his own calling, his own schedule, his own priorities. His mother can no longer have first place in his life.

It must have been a hard moment. But instead of anger over rejection, Mary accepts her son's mild rebuke, and tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them. It is a great step for a mother - to let go, to see her son as an adult, to accept that he has his own gifts, his own calling. They have a new relationship now, one adult to another. She will always be his mother, but now that means something new. She needs to pull back, to let him become who he is called to be.

Recognizing growth and adulthood in our children is not easy. Letting go is hard. But no adult needs mother or father telling them what to do, setting their schedule, deciding their agenda. No young adult should be torn between loyalty to parents and spouse. It is an act of grace for parents to let go, and to embrace the fact that God is now at work in

their children's lives, and it is to him they must now answer.

4) *Always Protect*

There is one more scene, of course, that Mary must endure. Her son's pursuit of God's calling leads him into arrest, trial and condemnation. She is there: like several other women she has left home in Galilee and traveled with him to Jerusalem as a disciple - at this point the only one in her family who believes that God is uniquely at work in him.

And so the day comes when they take him out and execute him in the barbaric fashion Romans reserved for peasants and non-Romans in the provinces. And Mary is there with the small group that stays at the cross when Jesus' other friends have fled in fear. She is there to hear his last words, she is there to accept his wishes that she be cared for by his friend John. She is a woman in her late 40s now, and she has lived to see her son die. But she will never desert him, even when she can do nothing but pray for him and be with him. Like Rachel, the mother of the nation, she *"weeps for her son who is no more;"* but she will never stop trusting God.

Good mothers, even when their children get into serious trouble, stand by them, pray for them, and never stop loving them. So Mary is there when her son's body is laid in a tomb; she is there among the women who watch and wait and on the third day are the first to discover that Jesus has risen! In the following weeks, Mary is there in Jerusalem to meet him, and after he finally leaves them to "return to his Father," she is there among the disciples waiting on his final instructions for the Spirit to come. Mary is one of the 100 or so disciples present at Pentecost, when the power of God descends on them and they finally understand, finally have the power, to tell others what Jesus was all about.

Believing, faithful mothers, like Mary, know when to embrace God's will, when to trust him for the impossible, why they are called to do what has to be done, how children grow up in ways that leave you treasuring

their words and actions but pondering deeply what it all means; how the time comes to let go and admit they are adults who must now obey God; how whatever happens to them, you never stop being there for them; how you always pray that God's will be done in their lives, and in your own.

Motherhood is hard - perhaps the toughest job in the world. Mothers need God's grace every day. But when children say *"Mother, didn't you know, didn't you understand what was going on in my life, how God was starting to work in me?"* a believing mother knows her sons and daughters are growing up well, and that is a great reward.

Let us pray...