

THE HUNGER FOR THE DIVINE

(Fourth in the series: All I Want for Christmas is...)

Texts: Luke 2:1-20; Exodus 40:34-38

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Introduction

What are we supposed to do with Mary? We've spoken these past weeks of angels, shepherds, and even ancient Romans. What about her? Mary is a bit like the Christmas tree ornaments you pulled down out of the attic a few weeks ago. We couldn't do Christmas without her. And in few weeks we'll pack her up and put her away until next year.

Some Christians make more of Mary than we do. A young Catholic boy wanted a bicycle badly. His mother suggested that he take his concerns to the Holy Mother Mary in prayer. So before Johnny went to bed he composed this prayer on a piece of paper:

Mary, mother of God, could you see that I get a bicycle? All my friends have one. Amen.

He placed the prayer next to his statue of the Virgin and went to sleep. The next morning when he didn't have a bike, he wasn't discouraged. He repeated the same steps that night, and every night for a week, with the same discouraging results.

Finally he took the statue of Mary, wrapped it in a towel, and hid it in the back of drawer. When he went to sleep that night he prayed:

Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, I better get that bike!

I'm not suggesting that we pray to or through Mary. But I am suggesting that we quit leaving her in the Christian attic eleven months a year.

Mary is in Scripture – at the very beginning of the Christmas story - to guide us, all year long. Mary is there to direct our hunger for God in the direction of Jesus Christ.

1. Let's call our hunger for God – for divinity - “spirituality”. It's that persistent, often undisciplined, sometimes unruly itch in our souls to connect with something beyond ourselves.

It's the flip side of God's desire to connect with us. Our Old Testament story is of a God who is moving closer. From the distant top of Mt. Sinai, to the portable Tent of Meeting within the camp of Israel, God seeks to dwell ever closer to his people.

Most surveys of attitudes toward religion in our country tell us today that we are quickly becoming a less “religious” people. But those same surveys also tell us we are more interested in “spirituality” now than in any time in recent history. We'd like to connect. It's the echo of who we are created to be.

Most of us in this room today have chosen to scratch our spiritual itch in some brand name kinds of places – Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Roman Catholic. What's hard to grasp is that most people share our itch, but they feel no need to scratch it in our brand name religious establishments.

N.T. Wright, a Christian theologian, says that our spirituality can behave like a stream that somebody paved over by mistake –either through neglect or spiritless “organized religion”. You can forget that the hunger for God is there for a while, until it bubbles up through the floor. But when it bubbles up it comes out in some strange places.

We live in a time of “boutique” spirituality. For every religious impulse there is a vendor ready to meet the need. The problem is not every impulse is healthy, and not every vendor is legitimate.

There are many vendors today of good “authentic spirituality” that have nothing to do with the brand names of the past. And then there are others – New Age mysticism with its Tarot Cards, crystals, horoscopes, and eco-worship. And there's the fundamentalism that dominates our news and leads people of several different religious backgrounds into violent conflict to reach their goals.

I believe that God is doing a new thing in our time – that the brand name spiritual vendors of Christianity are giving way to something new. What that is I'm not sure. But I'm also worried that there are too many opportunities to quench your spiritual thirst with polluted water.

So if brand name spirituality is slowly fading out –and boutique spirituality comes with plenty of risk – how shall we satisfy our thirst and our hunger for God? Where shall we go for living water?

We might want to try “Mary” spirituality. She points the way to an encounter with God that promises to bring us into the presence of God. And isn’t that what we are hungering for?

- 2. Mary wasn’t shopping at any spiritual boutiques in search of an appealing experience of God. It was exactly the opposite. The object of our spiritual hunger came to her and made her an inconvenient offer.**

I suspect that most of you know the story. An angel visits Mary and tells her that she has found favor with God. And what is the sign of such favor?

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

After Mary asks the Angel how this virginal conception will take place, she is told:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...

I’m sure that cleared everything up, aren’t you? I’m reminded of the cartoon where a mathematician begins to sketch out a complex problem on a blackboard and right the middle of the equation writes “and then a miracle happens” and then puts the answer. So did Mary really know about God’s plans for her life? It seems she knew enough.

I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.

That’s Mary spirituality. It says “yes” to the sound of God’s presence in our lives. It says “yes” to the invitation to embrace the Christ child and let Jesus make a difference in our lives. God happens in our lives because of his initiative. But God is not born into our lives apart from our “yes”.

The repeatable miracle of Christmas is that we, like her, can say “yes” to the deepening presence of God in our lives. Every day of our lives, in every situation we find ourselves we can say, “I am the Lord’s servant.” Mary spirituality urges us to surrender every area of our lives presence of God. It does not wander among the spiritual boutiques shopping for what might fulfill us.

We don't say "yes" to the presence of Jesus in our lives because we know all. We say yes because we know enough. Enough to put down the reigns the reigns of control and open ourselves to the presence of the Christ. *May it be to me as you have said.*

3. Mary spirituality says "yes" to the indwelling of God in our lives. And then it ponders the result.

When Jesus was born the people who heard the report of the shepherds were "amazed." (2:18) I'm sure they were. News of a visit from God, then and now, usually creates a stir. So does a good card trick. But amazement doesn't equal belief. Surprise, wonder, derision, doubt – all these things can come with "amazement"

The shepherds, on the other hand, *returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard...*

Amazement for them had become faith. God is thanked and worshipped for his intrusion into their lives and into the world.

But Mary does something different:

(She) treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Mary, it seems took the time to look deeply into these events in her and around her in order to grasp their deepest significance. Mary spirituality "ponders". It is a lingering, lasting, unrushed exploration of the presence of God in our lives. It doesn't skip over the familiar territory of life in search of a God who is above it all. It knows that there is a mystery going on deep within us that requires more than our casual attention.

Trouble is we aren't a pondering people. Probing spiritual mysteries is not the first thought most people have as we prepare for the holidays. As one spiritual writer has put it, "God is always present, but we are not always present to God." We want to Google God and satisfy our spiritual hunger. We'd like to narrow God down to a "tweet". Is it any wonder Jesus remains for to many of us a rumor instead of relationship?

But we can choose to ponder our spirituality, our sense of God in our lives. Praying, studying scripture, serving the poor, experiencing the sacraments are all ways we can linger on the mystery of God's presence in our lives. They are all ways generations of men and women report that have brought them face-to-face with Jesus.

Most of us are in search for a quick answer to our spiritual hunger. God, it seems, is not in such a hurry to provide it.

Conclusion

Madeline L'Engle, a Christian writer, wrote a number of years ago:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason,
There had been no room for the child.*

I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

What do we say? Are we hungry enough to say yes? Are we hungry enough to ponder the presence of God we discover in our souls?