



December 18, 2011
Advent 4
Luke 1:26-38

³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.... ³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

“An Instrument of Peace”

There’s an interesting dustup in New Zealand over the Virgin Mary. And no, it’s not the usual cultural battle between skeptics and believers. That battle goes on everywhere all the time.

This controversy has to do with a church billboard. An Anglican church there in New Zealand, St. Matthew’s In the City, has commissioned a series of controversial ads, including a giant billboard depicted the Virgin Mary, traditionally attired in Renaissance garb, holding in her hand a modern day pregnancy test and clearly shocked by the results.

It’s a bizarre picture—comical, strange, and haunting, all at the same time. There are no words on the billboard; just the archetypal image of the Virgin Mary holding a positive pregnancy test and looking a little nonplussed.

The church vestry has defended the odd picture, saying that it’s intended to “spark thought and conversation in the community.”



As to that effect, it has no doubt succeeded. The Vicar of the church went further in defending the image, saying, "Christmas is real. It's about a real pregnancy, a real mother and a real child... Mary was young, unmarried and poor. She was certainly not the first woman in this situation or the last."

But the local Catholic diocese did not take to the picture very warmly, saying "St. Matthew's ignores the gospel account of matters surrounding the pregnancy and birth of Jesus, in which Mary is not a shocked solo mother but a young woman who has given her assent and trust to God."

That much is true. But the Catholic Church can hardly take highroad here. It has for centuries invented a host of extra biblical theological dogma to with which to surround the Virgin Mary, from her own immaculate conception to her perpetual virginity to her assumption into heaven.

Protestants don't often understand these papal pronouncements, and often assume that the "Immaculate Conception" refers to the virginal conception of Jesus, but in actuality it refers to Mary's own conception, in which God protects her from inheriting the stain of original sin.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that Mary, by an act of God's grace, is born into the world without sin, and that she lived a sinless life, as the teaching of her perpetual virginity is meant to affirm by removing any hint of licentiousness or concupiscence.

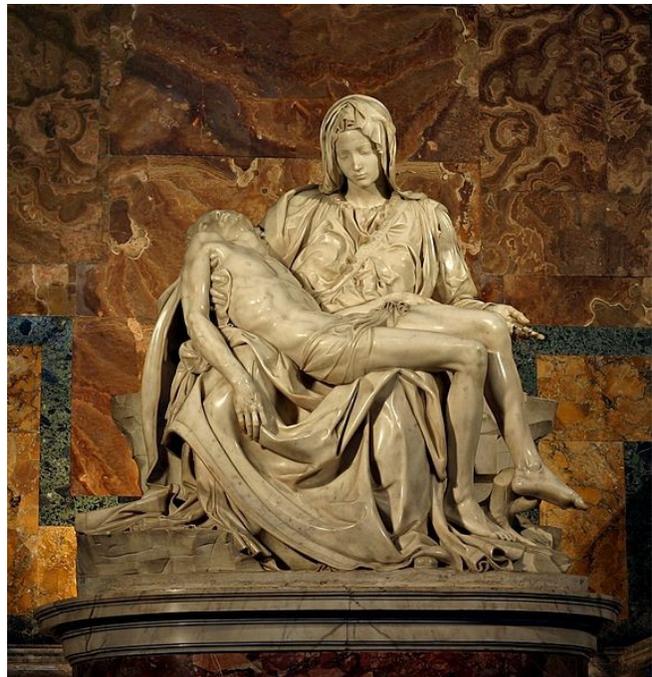
As a result, she has been denied her own children—James and Jude and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus have been said to come from another woman, perhaps Joseph's "first" wife. What an immeasurable insult would such be to a Jewish woman in the ancient world!

At the end of the Mary's life, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that she was taken bodily into heaven as was Enoch and Elijah and the resurrected Christ.

These dogmas, now considered infallible by papal decree, paint the Virgin Mary—"the Mother of God"—as an otherworldly being, wholly set apart and semi-divine, and completely disconnected from her people and her world.

Now, this would be a particularly terrible sermon if it consisted solely of a Presbyterian pastor denouncing the Catholic understanding of Mary. In fact, it's not just the Catholics who've painted a false veneer over the Mary. The Church, both Protestant and Catholic, has long distorted and mythologized poor Mary.

Artists have long depicted Mary as pale and anemic, often deathly thin, sorrowful, soft and androgynous. Just take a look at this morning's bulletin cover. It's a beautiful painting, but no more realistic or "biblical" than Mary holding a modern day pregnancy test.



She has been systematically denied her ethnicity; her Jewishness has been completely erased. She cannot have the tanned and olive skin of one who lived in the Mediterranean basin.

Strangely, she's even denied the dignity of growing old. It does not matter if the artist is depicting Mary at the birth of her son or Mary as she holds the crucified Christ—she is perpetually young, always fragile, always pale. She is denied the honor of becoming an elder with silver hair and the folds and furrows of age.

In an effort to honor Mary, both Catholic and Protestant churches have denied her her humanity, her ethnicity, her motherhood, her Children, and even her death.

None of this is at all biblical in any sense of the word. But Christianity has long tried to push Mary out of this world.

It is perhaps the product of a pagan philosophy and religious ideology that crept into Christianity at its infancy. Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism both held that the material world was little more than a far, distant, and cold shadow of the divine light of eternal things and eternal forms.

The material world was evil, and material things, worldly things, in general were negative and destructive. To be holy, one needed to escape the world, to separate oneself from the world, to curl into one's own being and shed every vestige of the world save the divine spark within your own soul.

No wonder the church wanted to deny Mary her ethnicity, her motherhood, her gender, and even her death. Her Jewishness, her poverty, her motherhood, her sex, and her death all tie her to a material world—they give her her humanity, and to be holy one must deny her humanity.

Now there's nothing Jewish about such ideas. Neither Mary nor Joseph nor Jesus would have considered the material world to be a mere shadow of the divine spirit. They would have considered this world blessed by God and good; a world lovingly made by the Father's hands. Being holy would not have been a matter of separating one's self from the world, but living in the world in obedience and humility.

So, perhaps it is right for us at Christmas time to put Mary into her context and give her back to her people, her time, and her world. If she were like most young women of her day, she would have been a teenager, no older than sixteen at the most, when she became engaged to Joseph.

Her engagement to Joseph would have been as binding as a marriage vow, and her pregnancy could have at best put her reputation and social standing in jeopardy and at worst put her life in grave danger.

She was a young, poor, unmarried girl, and she was pregnant. All the angels in heaven couldn't have protected her from those hurtful rumors and the

disappointed looks of the village elders. Her peers no doubt shunned her and excluded her for fear of guilt by association.

She would have depended wholly and completely on Joseph not to have abandoned her. She and Joseph would find themselves bringing this special child into the world in a stable, with no crib for the babe, only a feeding trough.

In the ancient world, giving birth to a baby was as dangerous as going into battle. Mothers often lost their lives trying to bring children into this world. And there was such heartbreak—something like only two out of five children would live to see adulthood.

But what is remarkable about this story and what does make Mary most holy and blessed among women (and men) is that she is pleased to be the handmaiden of God and an instrument of divine grace.

Holiness and blessedness are not qualities which we earn by separating ourselves from our earth, our people, and our humanity—holiness and blessedness are earned by living obediently in the world.

If we want to be considered holy, then we have to roll up our sleeves and go get muddy doing the work of the Lord here on earth for our fellow travelers.

Being virtuous, saintly, pious, and pure isn't a matter of shunning life and separating oneself from the hardship and flux of existence. Being virtuous, saintly, pious, and pure is all about getting your boots dirty as you go about doing the work of being kind and gracious in a world that thrives on cruelty and revenge.

It's not a sin to be human. It's not a sin to be born human, to live among your people, to marry and have children. It's not a sin to be human. But, it is a sin to deny the humanity of others, to deny a person the dignity of being considered equal and valuable and sacred to God.

Virtue, then, true virtue is about being an instrument of God's peace and grace in the world, not apart from it.

There are all sorts of ways that we can be instruments of God's peace and love; and they all involve stepping into this world.

Sometimes it's tempting for pastors to just sit around and write sermons, to be pulpiteers, crafting beautiful and moving sermons. But, there's little holiness in such work. If pastors want to be instruments of peace, they have to venture out into the world.

There is much pastoral work to be done in nursing homes, hospitals, and at bedsides. There is much ministry that needs to be done at community shelters, soup kitchens, and prisons. There is much misery on the streets and in the ghettos. There are nations where poverty and violence are so endemic as to be a way of life.

There's nothing holy about staying in a nice warm office crafting sermons about being holy, as I have pretty much done this week, with only a few exceptions.

And the same is true for you. There's nothing holy about going once a week to hear someone preach on living a life of faith and action, especially if all you do at the end of that sermon is just return to your life of comfort and safety. Virtue must be more than words—more than speaking words and more than hearing words spoken.

Next month, a group from our church will venture to Haiti to install a clean water filtration system in a village without access to clean water. It won't be an easy journey or an easy task, but nothing heroic ever is.

It will be difficult, and the poverty our team will witness is the deep poverty of the most depressed nation of the western hemisphere. They will have to roll up their sleeves and get dirty. Their boots will get muddy. But they will be true instruments of peace and love.

The holiness of Mary is revealed in her willingness to hear God's plan and respond, "Let it be, according to your word." That is Mary's holiness. May

we learn from her. May we learn to hear God's word of grace and love, mission and justice, and so respond: "Let it be, according to your word."

Lord, make us instruments of peace and grace in your world!

Amen.