

“The Disciple”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on December 11th 2012 (Third Sunday of Advent)
by Foster Freed

Luke 1: 46-56

Hard for me to resist, this morning...hard for me, right at the outset, to resist referencing the late, great Oscar Hammerstein II!

*How do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How do you find a word that means Maria?*

And while I hasten to note that the Maria in question this morning, unlike the Maria in *Sound of Music* is most definitely neither a “flibbertijbbet not a will-o’the wisp” and is most certainly not “a clown”...

.... there is, nevertheless, a sense...a sense in which “our” Maria—Mary of Nazareth, the mother of our Lord”—a sense in which our Maria **has** become a problem...a problem in the sense that she continues to serve as a source of division...a source of strong disagreement...within the precincts of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Not that this is a recent phenomenon! Not by a long shot!!

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To cite the most ancient of examples: students of church history will recognize that the question of Mary’s title became a significant source of division in the early centuries of the church’s existence. All Christians, back then, were unanimous in their belief that Mary deserved the title “Christotokos”, a Greek designation meaning “the mother of Christ”. More controversial—and I suspect controversial to this day—is the further, more expansive title, “Theotokos”, which means “the mother of God”. And while that dispute, when push comes to shove, may actually reveal more about what we think about “Jesus” than what we think about “Mary”, it remains the fact that it was the first great theological controversy in which Mary was involved. It was hardly the last!

More pressing, I suspect, from our decidedly Protestant perspective, is the role Mary came to play, especially within the world of Roman Catholic spirituality though by no means restricted to Roman Catholicism. Protestantism—mildly under Martin Luther, more radically under his successors—Protestantism began to express strong reservations about Mary’s role as a mediator. After all: scripture makes it clear that Jesus Christ came to be mediator between humanity and God; hard not to be at least mildly puzzled by the extent to which much of Christendom has managed—and with very little scriptural warrant—to turn Mary into a mediator between humanity and her son Jesus. Trust me! Nearly 500 years after Luther’s launching of the Reformation, that’s an issue which is far from resolved. But there’s more.

Enter modernity...enter the openness the mainline Protestant tradition (for over 200 years) has shown toward the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially the scientific aspects of the Enlightenment...and it's not hard to imagine the extent to which the whole question of the Virgin Birth...more accurately described as the Virginal Conception of Jesus...has become deeply problematic. Indeed: I suspect that one of the key reasons United Church of Canada folk much prefer the United Church's "New Creed" to the more traditional "Apostle's Creed", is because United Church Christians tend to become uneasy with a faith-statement that speaks of Christ as having been born of "the *Virgin Mary*". For what it's worth, let me simply note that I tend to be a bit of an outlier on this issue: I remain puzzled by the claim that there is a conflict here between what science has to say and what our faith tradition has to say; if the God we worship cannot manipulate a strand of DNA, then frankly the God we worship is not much of a God. That having been said, what does concern me here is the way in which the whole notion of Christ's Virgin Birth has subtly (and at times not so subtly) distorted the Christian understanding of human sexuality. That sort of distortion—that sort of denigration of human sexuality—is a major problem...one in which Jesus' virginal conception does play a role. And so yes:

How **do** you solve a problem like Maria?
How **do** you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How **do** you find a word that means Maria?
How! How, indeed??

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Those of you...those of you who make a habit of pondering sermon titles...may already have caught a glimpse of the word I have in mind for us this morning. *How do you find a word that means Maria?* Well: for our purposes this morning, the word I have in mind is the word "disciple". And I realize, that word may strike some of you as a trifle peculiar, placed in the present context. We normally speak of "The Virgin Mary", not of "The Disciple Mary". Besides: the word disciple means "follower", and in the case of Jesus and Mary, it was Jesus the son who followed on the heels of Mary his mother, not the other way around. More to the point, isn't the word "disciple" better reserved for the small handful of mainly male followers Jesus personally chose to gather around him during the brief period in which he was engaged in active ministry?

And yes...yes: I get all that. I have no objection to any of that. And yet...and yet: consider Mary's life. Having brought Jesus into this world...presumably having played a very large role in nurturing him and bringing him safely to adulthood—

...a process to which, with one small exception, we are not privy within the pages of Scripture...

...having brought Jesus safely to adulthood, we know that Mary continues to haunt the shadows around the edges of Jesus' adult ministry. We catch a glimpse of her egging him on at Cana....we hear Jesus rebuking her (the way

he would rebuke any other disciple) when she appears to be placing family loyalties above loyalty to God...we see her at the foot of the Cross, being lovingly placed by her son in the care of another disciple...and we see her waiting and watching, hoping and praying in the midst of the other disciples in what must have been the anxious time between Christ's Ascension on the 40th day after Easter and the 50th day, the day of Pentecost, when Christ's Spirit arrived to launch the Christian movement with the spiritual equivalent of a full-force gale! Even if we put aside the non-Biblical traditions about Mary—many of them nearly as ancient as our scriptures—even if we put those further traditions about Mary to one side, the fact remains that we have enough to go on just within the four canonical Gospels, to make it clear that Mary—however else we picture her—can be rightly pictured as a disciple. Indeed!

If we take seriously the great poem—the great psalm—that Luke's Gospel places on Mary's lips...

...if we take the Magnificat with the degree of seriousness with which it ought to be taken...

...it provides a pretty clear invitation to the very life of discipleship that Mary herself exemplifies with such power and such poignancy. Beginning with the simple fact...beginning with the simple fact that the Magnificat...whatever else it exudes...exudes a deep understanding that our world, its wonders and majesties notwithstanding, our world is a world that remains far from complete.

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Those of you...those of you who were here last Sunday, to eavesdrop upon the conversation Hilde and I shared concerning the trajectory of our Advent journey....those of you who were here for that conversation, will recall Hilde and my contention that Advent is in many ways the season in which the New Testament church of Jesus Christ participates most fully in the Old Testament spirit of the people who awaited the coming their Messiah, the coming of the Christ. And the fact is: Mary's Magnificat might well be described as the Old Testament on steroids! To speak of a world in which "the proud of heart" jostle alongside those who can only be described as the "lowly"....to speak of a world in which there are still "rich" needing to be sent away empty so that those who are "hungry" can be filled with "good things"...to speak of a world in which the lavish promises made to Abraham and Sarah (a promise that every nation and all peoples, *without exception*, will experience fullness of blessing)...to recognize the gap between that promise and the at times obscene actuality of the world in which we live....to recognize that gap, to name that gap (as Mary so powerfully names it in her great Psalm)...is to be placed in the midst of those who continue to watch and to wait...those who refuse to pretend that the world as we know it is the world that God, in the beginning, pronounced very good! To pray the Magnificat is to say no to such complacency...to refuse the snares of naval-gazing contentment...to reject the comforting myth that the fact that I'm okay means that all is right with the world. Whatever else it means to be a disciple...to be a disciple side by side with the Disciple

Mary...whatever else it means...it means saying no to smug self-satisfaction. But, of course, there is more.

In naming the wrongness of the world in which we live...perhaps more accurately, in naming the “not-yet-fully-right”-ness of the world in which we live...the Magnificat does so not despairingly but hopefully, which is to say faithfully. Whatever else Mary’s way of discipleship represents, it represents the way of a deep and abiding faith: a faith confident that Israel’s God will not rest until the world has been put right; will not rest until the hungry have been filled; will not rest until the proud have learned what it means to sit in solidarity with the humble; will not rest until the lowly have been lifted up from their places of want and humiliation! And please note that Mary’s faith—and here again it is a faith that is fully in line with the witness of the Old Testament—Mary’s faith can be described as simple trust, trust in God’s power and God’s goodness. In other words, to speak of Mary’s faith is not the same thing as providing a laundry list of the “beliefs” to which Mary may or may not have subscribed! And while I personally think it a good thing that the United Church of Canada is presently engaged in an exercise that will hopefully help us to clarify and strengthen the core of **our** “beliefs”...

...you’ll be hearing more about that in the New Year...

...I hope and pray that we will never make the mistake of imagining that memorizing the tenets of even the most beautifully crafted Creed is a substitute for coming to place one’s trust in God...just as the Disciple Mary came to place her trust in God. Mary’s way of discipleship...begins and ends with just such trust...trust to which we too are enjoined. But there’s more...there’s one further thing that needs to be said.

There is a way of reading...a way of understanding the Magnificat...that would render it, quite frankly, as a piece of lovely evasion. After all: from beginning to end it’s a poem about God. Having noted, at the outset, that she intends to rejoice in God, that’s what the psalm proceeds to do, and with a concentration of focus that is simply breathtaking. The Magnificat is a celebration of God: the One who looks with favour on the lowliness of His servant; the One who has done great things; the One whose mercy is from generation to generation; the One who has lifted up the lowly; the One who has filled the hungry with good things; the One who has helped His servant Israel; above all, the One who has remembered to be merciful, to live from mercy unto mercy. And yes: as a celebration of God it’s terrific and helpful and exemplary! And yet, misread, it can easily be enlisted in the cause of those who wish to embrace the ever ready seduction of that most pernicious teaching known as “quietism”: a way of sitting back (with or without a martini in hand) while waiting for God to do God’s thing. Is that really what Mary’s way of discipleship is all about? Is that really and truly, at the end of the day, the spiritual path to which she would have us enter?

It’s here, I suspect...here at the end of these reflections...that we may be well advised (nervous Protestants though we be!) to recall Mary not simply as the Disciple but, yes, as the Virgin. Reminding ourselves that the whole notion of “virginity” is misused when it is used to denigrate human sexuality, we can do worse than to recall that the symbol of the “virgin” is more helpfully representative of a singleness of heart

and mind—a singleness of vision and of purpose—that finds a way to will but one thing: a singleness of vision and of purpose that wills God and only God. The point, you see, is that Mary is rightly recalled both as Disciple **and** as Virgin because she chose not only to speak but in fact to live the Magnificat!

And I am reminded, at this juncture, of another poem...one generally attributed to St. Francis. That poem doesn't say: Lord...bring peace...but rather: "Lord, make **me** a channel of your peace!" Not, Lord, eliminate hatred...but rather: "Lord, where there is hatred let **me** sow love!" Not, fight the forces of despair, O God...but rather: "Lord, where there is despair, let **me** bring hope."

And you see: the reason we remember Mary today has less to do with the **biological** connection that unites her to her son, but rather with the **spiritual** connection that anchors her in the same tradition of radical openness to God, the very openness that marked the life and death of the Jesus to whom Mary gave birth. Truly...truly it can be said of Mary that she **did** magnify God: her enlarged belly (filled with divinity) serving as the ultimate symbol of her willingness to be open to the power of God's love.

Need I add....need I add that we too are called to just such a life of discipleship? You see: there is a sense in which the job description of every person in this room (man and woman alike) is to go out there and get pregnant!

Yes, I realize...I'm not blind to the facts on the ground...I realize (given the current demographics of the Knox congregation)...that the list of emergencies our Knox First Responders are liable to be called to address on a Sunday morning do not likely include that of having to preside at the sudden onset of labour pains! But you know, folks: there is a sense in which discipleship for us—as for Mary—ideally means giving birth, which is to say: opening ourselves to God with such energetic abandon, that we give birth to those countless offspring God is never ashamed to claim as God's own. Generosity! Courage! Compassion! Hunger for Justice! Willingness to love...willingness to risk love in all of its splendour and all of its pain! This congregation...you see...this congregation and every congregation bearing the name of Christ...bearing the name of the One to whom Mary gave birth...this Church ought to regard itself as a maternity ward: as a place where the love of God is given flesh with which to walk the earth...and then, in due time, granted wings with which to fly.

May it be so! May such openness to God...such willingness to journey with God, trust in God, magnify God, **welcome** God: may such openness be our byword this day and always!

Maranatha! Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus Come! In your sweet name! Amen!!

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