

**The Message:** An Extraordinary Time for an Ordinary Woman!

"Mary - favored one! Blessed are you among women!  
The Lord is with you."



It wasn't until I was an adult that I knew what my name meant. My English mother named me after visiting the village of Morar in the Scottish highlands, thinking it was a pretty name for a girl. I never thought about what it meant. But as an adult, I have had a few people tell me its meaning. In Portuguese and Spanish it means 'to live' or 'permanent residence.' A former girlfriend of my brother's told me it meant 'bitter herbs' in Hebrew. In Roumanian it means miller or meal worm. Not great. in Gaelic either to pray or Lord or queen or great lady, and so we come to its use as the name of Mary -- but particularly Mary the mother of Jesus. Hence the name of the church that gives the village its name: Morar, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour & St Cumin. But it also seems to mean haddock so a bit of a conundrum.

Mary herself is a bit of a conundrum for us.

In the history of Christian art, we know that Mary's image - head usually covered in an Advent blue scarf - is portrayed almost as frequently as her son's.

The Madonna, the "pieta" image: the grieving mother holding her crucified son in tender arms and child - mother and child closely drawn together by love - is a theme which has fascinated generations of artists.

The humble birth and the tragic ending are united by the maternal love of Mary. We understand the mother in Mary. Beyond that it is hard to see.

My daughters' birth mothers were both sixteen when they gave birth. Did the world think that they could be mature parents at sixteen? Even they knew they couldn't handle the responsibility of parenthood. In that they were mature beyond their years and made a life changing sacrifice for themselves, for us, and above all for their daughters.

I think of them when I think of Mary. She might have been even a little younger.

Promised to Joseph, older, perhaps already a widower.

Theologians put a lot on Mary: virgin mother, conceived immaculately, mother of God!

All pedestals that raise her far beyond our humanity.

Some traditions seem to divinize Mary. Protestants are more likely to forget about Mary.

The doctrine of the Virgin birth is fairly recent in the Catholic church. It was only in the 19th century that the Vatican decreed that right from the moment when she was conceived there was no sin in Mary.

Don't get hung up on the word 'virgin'. In Hebrew the word would be maiden, young girl.

- If Jesus came to forgive our sins to be sacrificed on the cross for us to wipe our sins clean;
- if we can imagine ourselves going from sinful to forgiven -- I don't know about you, but that's a pretty big miracle in my case.

So thinking of Mary as pure, flawless, worthy to bear Jesus -- it doesn't seem any more miraculous than what happens to me and you.

And if that still leaves you hung up on the word, then lean on your Presbyterian roots, part of the three founding traditions in the United Church of Canada. When asked about the virgin birth, a Scottish minister said: "We are not *required* to believe in the virgin birth in the church of Scotland."

If you can't get past the word virgin to understand Mary in more complex ways, change the word to 'maiden' in your mind and move on.

If the virgin birth isn't a difficult teaching to believe, then give thanks for your faith in miracles, because, God knows we need miracles in today's world just as much as in Mary's.

I'd like to suggest that the important question isn't, 'Was Mary a Virgin?'

No, the important question is, 'Can we find a real, flesh and blood Mary underneath all the tradition?'

In between the awesome beginning and that cross-born end - during that 33-year lifetime of which we know so little - how did mother Mary really deal with this child?

Did she experience the same tiredness and frustrations all other mothers experience?

- Did she shout "NO!" as response to Jesus' naughty behaviour?
- Did she offer protective embraces as defense against seeing her beloved child attacked and hurt?

Matthew's Gospel informs us that Mary & Joseph both were frustrated at Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem when they had pilgrimed on toward Nazareth.

Remember the time when Jesus was tackling the powerful,

Mary and Jesus' siblings worried about his mental state.

They came to take him away to a safer place.

He declined with the line: 'my mother and brothers and sisters are those who do my Father's will.'

As a mother she was all too human - thank God.

If we believe deeply that Mary is one mother within the universal community of mothers and mother-like women

- a blessed - but truly human - daughter of God.

- human, like any woman in this place, living her personal incarnation,

then we can believe that each one of us -- ordinary souls -- is called to live out what purpose God has in mind for us.

Mary's story turns our minds toward divine providence to recognize that here none other than

- God is at work;
- God yet again actively fulfilling the divine purpose.
- God is the principal actor here and God works through just plain folks.
- God doesn't come "from the outside" - this is not an intervention or intrusion from beyond or from heaven into the affairs of earth.
- God works within God's creation, "from within;" it's an inside job.
- The world in all its working - inside and out - is God's.

Our God is passionately engaged in creation and intends to flood the world with presence.

Wm. Willimon suggests that a lot of the experiences of God active in the world "seem miraculous to us, not because they are so extraordinary, but because we tend not to pay attention." (Pulpit Resource, Dec. 21 03, p. 51)

But with Mary, we pay attention. And it is through this very ordinary, young woman, that the divine mystery of the ages is revealed in that very down to earth setting.

I end today with my version of the Magnificat we heard read earlier.

**"An Ordinary Woman"** ©2018 by Morar Murray-Hayes

An ordinary woman ... and yet, I was chosen.  
A messenger came to me ... from God,  
A gentle yet terrible presence.  
"God is with you," I heard.

**I was afraid ... because I was an ordinary woman.**

Strange tales this messenger told me ... of a child I would bear ...  
Not an ordinary child ... but one who would be of God:  
Exalted, ruling my people for ever  
...and bringing the reign of God to fruition.

**I doubted ... because I was an ordinary woman.**

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you!  
You will be overwhelmed by the power of the Most High.  
You will be blessed with motherhood;  
Your child shall be called holy... God's child."

**I believed... though I was an ordinary woman.**

When Elizabeth saw me, she too was filled with the Holy Spirit.

She blessed my child-to-be  
And she blessed me for my believing.

Now I know the Spirit -

As the joyful spirit filled my friend and the child within her  
As the nurturing spirit filled me and God's child within me...

I knew that I was the agent of new life and new hope for my despairing and sorrowful people.

**I know the Spirit**

...and my spirit rises rejoicing to meet my Saviour.

**I know the Spirit** and I know that nothing will be the same again.

God's mercy and strength will turn the world upside down.  
The proud will be scattered in the imagination of their hearts.

**The extraordinary will become ordinary;**

**The ordinary will be blessed.**

I know the Spirit ... I know the terror of the presence of God.  
I was an innocent woman.  
Now I am a grieving, triumphant woman.

**I am an ordinary woman ... Yet I am not afraid.**

-----  
What is God doing through Mary? What is God doing through you?  
Are you open to being an agent for new life and new hope?  
Don't be afraid!  
Let the Spirit know you and the world will be changed.

May it be so.