

The Feast of St. Mary the Virgin
Luke 1:46-55

Pointing the Way*

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I learned how to do a lot of interesting things during my time as a Boy Scout. I learned how to tie a square knot. I learned how to flip over a canoe that had capsized. But one of the more useful things that I learned about was how to read trail markers. Trail markers, for those of you who might not have heard of them, are little signs on a wilderness trail that help point you in the right direction.

One common trail marker consists of stones placed on top of each other. If you are walking along a trail, and you see one stone placed on top of another, you will know that you are going in the right direction. If you see a third stone placed either to the left or to the right of such a formation, you will know that you should turn left or right. And three stones stacked on top of each other means “pay attention” or “watch out ahead.”

It can be scary to get lost while hiking in the forest. There was something comforting about trail markers. I knew that if I paid attention to them, they would help me from veering off track.

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. This is an important feast day for many of us who worship in Anglo-Catholic parishes. Some of us love this feast day because Mary is a way of accessing the motherly love of God in a liturgical tradition that often talks about God in male terms. Others of us love this feast day because Mary is a symbol of the merciful, nurturing, and life-giving power of God. Still others love this feast day because Mary is central to our devotional and prayer life. Think, for example, of how important praying the rosary is to many members of our parish.

But others of us might be concerned – to say the least – about Mary. Perhaps you might feel this way yourself. You might be concerned that certain Marian doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, are not grounded in the Bible. Or you might be concerned that too much veneration of Mary could take away from the unique role of Jesus as the savior of the world. If so, you would be in good company. Since the English Reformation in the 1500s, the Anglican tradition has wrestled deeply with the place of Mary in our common worship life.

So, in a typical Anglican fashion, how might we think about the Virgin Mary in a way that honors all of us?

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For me, the significance of Mary lies in her role as a pointer to God. Mary is like the trail markers that I learned about as a Boy Scout. She helps us from getting lost or veering off track. The Mother of God tells us when we are on the right path, when we need to turn, or when there is danger ahead. Rather than pointing to herself as an object of worship, Mary points to God. She is a signpost for the faithful.

I'd like to call your attention to the icon on the cover of your worship bulletin. The icon is called the Virgin *Hodegetria*. This is just one of many icons of the Madonna and child that have this name. *Hodegetria* is a Greek word that means "the one who shows the way." If you look closely at the image, you will see that the Virgin Mary is pointing at the Baby Jesus. By pointing to Jesus, Mary is literally showing us "the Way" – to the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Interestingly, the Baby Jesus is pointing right back at the Virgin Mary, and he is looking right at her (as he blesses her). I believe that the message of the *Hodegetria* icon is this: In order to understand fully who the Virgin Mary is, we must look to Jesus. But, similarly, in order to understand fully who Jesus is, we must look to his mother.

Today's gospel passage is the Magnificat from Luke's gospel. The Magnificat is the song of praise that Mary sings after she is greeted by her elderly cousin Elizabeth. For centuries, the Magnificat has been sung or recited at evening prayer. To me, it is one of the most beautiful – and revolutionary – songs in our liturgical tradition.

Like the *Hodegetria* icon, the Magnificat is actually not a song *about* Mary. Rather, the Magnificat points to three things that are *beyond* Mary: God's greatness; God's grace; and God's justice.

God's greatness. Mary begins the Magnificat by singing "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." ("Magnificat" means to "magnify" in Latin.) So what does it mean when Mary says that her soul "magnifies" the Lord? How can God – who is already the greatest thing imaginable – be made any greater?

Well, in the same way that a magnifying glass helps us to see an object with greater detail and clarity, Mary's life helps us to see God's greatness with more detail and clarity. (Do you remember using a magnifying glass as a kid to look at things in greater detail?) In fact, each of our lives is a magnifying glass that can help others to see God's greatness. Through us, others can better understand the greatness of God. Like the *Hodegetria* icon, each of our lives is a pointer to the divine.

God's grace. Mary continues by singing "[God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant . . . the Mighty One has done great things for me." Again, this passage is not about Mary. She does not sing about all the great things that she has done and how she definitely deserves to be the Mother of God. Rather, she acknowledges her humble roots, and how she is the recipient of God's grace.

God's grace is a purely unmerited gift. It is not something that can be earned through our efforts or by our striving. Many people think of the Christian faith as a reward system for following the rules. If we do as we're told, then we'll be rewarded with a golden ticket through the pearly gates. But grace is the exact opposite of that. God loves us, despite of who we are, and despite of what we've done. God loves us – blemishes and all. In this way, our lives are not pointers to ourselves and what we've done. Rather, our lives are pointers to God's grace.

God's justice. In the Magnificat, Mary sings about how God turns the values of the world upside down. Pride. Power. Wealth. Our society sees these things as the pinnacle of success. But these are the very things, according to Mary, that God rejects. God has "scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." God has "brought down the powerful from their thrones." And God has "sent the rich away empty."

Indeed, God has a preferential option for the humble, the powerless, and the poor. According to the Magnificat, God's mercy is given to those who are humble: that is, "those who fear him from generation to generation." Similarly, God has "lifted up the lowly." And God has "filled the hungry with good things."

It may seem – in these troubled times – that the proud, the powerful, and the wealthy are the ones who are favored by God. But according to the Magnificat, it is the humble, the powerless, and the poor who actually point the way to God. They are the trail markers who show us how to get to the kingdom of heaven.

On this Feast of St. Mary the Virgin, we celebrate the motherly love of God. But we also celebrate Mary as the one who points us to the way to God. Just as Mary points to the infant Jesus in the *Hodegetria* icon, she also points, in the Magnificat, to God's greatness, God's grace, and God's justice.

May our souls, like Mary's, always magnify the greatness of the Lord. And may we always point the way to God's kingdom for others, through the example of our lives.

