

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

Where's Mary?*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
August 18, 2019

I've always been fascinated by the *Where's Waldo?* children's books. Some of you may know what I'm talking about. The books contain a number of incredibly detailed hand-drawn scenes, some with literally hundreds of elements – such as a huge crowd of people in a natural history museum or a sports stadium. The goal is to find Waldo – always dressed in his red and white striped sweater – somewhere in the midst of all the visual chaos.

A few days ago, I had my own *Where's Waldo?* experience right here in the Little Church. Only it was more like *Where's Mary?* I was wondering exactly how many images of the Virgin Mary there were in the church. And so I started back in the Holy Family Chapel, and I slowly made my way to the high altar. I was really surprised by how many images of Mary – dressed in her traditional blue clothing – that I found in the church. To be honest, I stopped counting after a while. That made me think that we should have a contest someday to see who among you can find the most images of Mary! First prize could be a rosary or something like that.

The point of all this, of course, is that the Virgin Mary – whose feast day we celebrate today – plays a central role in our parish. That's not surprising based upon our Anglo-Catholic heritage. After all, we do recite the rosary together each Sunday, we walk the stations of the cross during Fridays in Lent, and we sing the Angelus on certain Marian feast days – as we will do at the end of mass today. As Anglicans, we believe what we pray – *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.

But notwithstanding all of the Marys that surround us, I know that a number of you have reservations about the theological doctrines about the Virgin Mary. I completely get it. I'll be the first to admit that doctrines like the immaculate conception, the perpetual virginity of Mary, and her dormition or assumption into heaven, are even challenging to me from a biblical and theological perspective. So how can we make sense of this feast day for those of you who might have mixed feelings about this feast day?

For me, the significance of Saint Mary the Virgin lies not so much in abstract theological doctrines, but in what she can teach us about responding to God's grace in our lives. For me, the significance of Mary can be summed up in one word: gratitude. Mary is the exemplar of someone who is grateful for what God has done for her – as opposed to her focusing on what she has done for God.

* Copyright © 2019 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

In other words, Mary recognizes that the good things in her life are a gift from God. They are not things that she has earned or that she deserves as a matter of right. Mary recognizes that she is, in fact, full of God's grace. She is grateful for those gifts. And she's not afraid to tell that to others.

This theme of gratitude for God's grace pervades today's gospel reading. The gospel text is the Magnificat, which is a beautiful canticle that has been sung at evening prayer throughout the history of the Church. Mary proclaims these powerful words when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth while both of them are pregnant – with Elizabeth carrying John the Baptist, and Mary carrying Jesus.

Mary “magnifies” or praises God because she is grateful for what God has done for her. She says that God has “looked with favor” upon the “lowliness of his servant.” However, not only has the Mighty One done “great things” for Mary, but God has done great things for others as well – including lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things.

In fact, that's what our Old Testament reading is about. In the passage from the Book of Isaiah, we hear the voice of the people of the New Jerusalem rejoicing after God has restored Zion to its former glory. They, like Mary, will rejoice and exult in God because God has clothed them with the “garments of salvation” and the “robe of righteousness.”

Gratitude is at the heart of today's readings. And, if you think about it, gratitude is at the heart of what we do every Sunday at mass. The word “eucharist” means thanksgiving in the Greek. In the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, we offer ourselves, our souls, and our bodies to God with gratitude through a sacrifice of “praise and thanksgiving.” And, in return, God lifts us up and fills us with grace through the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

A little over four and a half years ago – on January 18, 2015, to be precise – Michael and I walked through the Lychgate and into our parish garden and church for the very first time. It was a uncertain period in my life and my ministry. Michael and I had just moved back to New York City after spending several years in the Boston area. I had been offered a wonderful opportunity with a national agency of the Episcopal Church here in Manhattan, and so I made the difficult decision of leaving my teaching position at an Episcopal seminary. I also left the comfortable familiarity of the Episcopal church in downtown Boston where I had been serving for some time.

Other than my job with the church agency, I had no idea about how I might be called to serve as a priest in this diocese. One day, I was talking to Canon Jeanne Person, the priest on Bishop Dietsche's staff whose job it is to minister to the clergy of the diocese. Somewhat lost, I told Canon Person that I was looking for an Anglo-Catholic parish with traditional liturgy but also progressive values. Immediately she said to me: “Have you considered Transfiguration?”

Believe it or not, I actually did not know about Transfiguration. And so Michael and I decided to check out the parish the following Sunday. Eastward facing. Check. Rite I. Check. Diverse and friendly parishioners. Check. Open and affirming. Check. And it certainly didn't

hurt that this was the actors' church, particularly since I was married to an actor. Check. And so we stayed.

I never would have imagined back in January 2015 that I would spend the next four and a half years here, including two years as your Associate Rector. As you might recall, there were a lot of clergy serving on Sundays back then. In addition to Bishop St. John, there was Father McPherson, Father Fleenor, Mother Jett, Father Platt, and Deacon Betts. I wasn't sure if there was even room for a seventh cleric in the chancel. But thankfully there was room at the inn. And some 270 homilies and sermons later, here I am today.

Serving at Transfiguration has been one of the great blessings of my life. As Saint Mary the Virgin has taught me to recognize, I am filled with gratitude with what God has done for me. And as my time here draws to a close, I realize that it is ultimately not about what I have done for God in this place. Rather, to paraphrase the Magnificat, it is about my giving thanks for how God has lifted us up as a community during the past four and a half years, and how God has filled us with so many good things during our time together.

Thank you for the love and kindness that you have shown to me. And thank you for your patience and forgiveness during the times when I may have hurt you or let you down. I would not be the priest who I am today without you. Michael and I will always carry you and the parish in our hearts.

God bless you, and God bless the Little Church Around the Corner!