

Mother's Day with the Mother of God

There are mornings when describing the Gospel appointed for the day feels a little bit like looking for Jesus in *Where's Waldo?* if not in "The Perils of Pauline." Our LORD and Savior often had to navigate risky situations, and today's passage is no exception. "We find our hero on the portico of the Temple in Jerusalem at the Feast of Hanukkah, surrounded by hostile Pharisees ..." All kidding aside, Jesus is in a genuinely sticky situation here. If we read this passage in context, we'd see that the Temple authorities are furious because Jesus has violated the Sabbath – again – to heal a man born blind. When they challenge him in all their righteousness, Jesus has the gall to accuse *them* of spiritual blindness. Then, he launches into a long diatribe about sheep and shepherds, echoed in today's passage, and finishes by sidestepping their question of whether he's the Messiah or not with more gobbledy-gook about sheep. *We* could tell them that Jesus is the Messiah, but the frustrated Temple authorities aren't really looking for an answer. They just want a clear statement from Jesus so they can take decisive action to silence him before the Romans notice him and somebody gets hurt. By the time Jesus declares that he and the Father are one, his exasperated questioners are literally ready to stone him to death.

Can you just imagine what it must have been like to be that man's mother?

From the various Gospels, we know that Mary must have been an extraordinary woman. She would have had to be. God chose her not only to give birth to Jesus, but to raise him, tracking him down when he vanished into the Temple as a teenager and putting up with his brash public declarations that only those who do God's will are his mother and brothers. (Mary actually did God's will by having Jesus, of course, but somehow that point gets lost in the moment.) Most important, God chose Mary to walk with Jesus in his Passion, through the bloody streets of the *Via Dolorosa* all the way to Golgotha. Scripture tells us that Mary took it all in stride,

watching the events of her firstborn son's sacred, astonishing life and "pondering them in her heart." Admittedly, I don't read Greek, but I suspect that a more accurate translation of Mary's "pondering" might be "putting on a good face and trying to be supportive to her child while worrying herself sick over what might happen to him."

Don't we, the mothers of the world, worry just as constantly over our own children? Nobody gets crucified or stoned to death these days, at least not in the United States, but children can be hurt or killed in ways Mary couldn't even have imagined. They have access to cars, drugs, violent video games, and appallingly profane music. As a woman who has enjoyed a life of undeserved privilege, I've been able to sidestep some of the warnings other mothers have to impress upon their children. When our daughter started driving, I told her to be polite if the police ever pulled her over. I never had to tell her to keep her hands on the dashboard and not to reach into the glove compartment without explaining why first. The police might ticket her, but they weren't going to shoot her. I wish every mother could say the same.

The worrying doesn't stop when the kids grow up. Young adults don't always move away from their parents, but they get horrible jobs, fall in love with unsuitable people, travel to scary places, take up dangerous hobbies, and generally refuse to live their lives swathed in bubble wrap as their protective parents might prefer. Sometimes they make bad choices. They get sick, go broke, get their hearts broken. Sometimes they die. If Mary, Mother of God, had to deal with outliving her eldest child, it's inevitable that some of us will have to do so as well.

But, as John's Gospel demonstrates, Mary was in a uniquely challenging position. Of the four Evangelists, John is the most mystical, the most inclined to show us a Jesus who is fully aware of his divine nature and fully prepared to make the sacrifices that his beloved Father requires of him. We can be pretty sure that, if Mary had told Jesus to stop provoking the Temple

authorities, to stop talking nonsense about sheep and maybe rethink this whole martyrdom thing, he wouldn't have taken it well. Jesus was literally a man on a mission from God. He would never have let a little motherly advice get in the way.

And speaking of sheep, let's turn for a moment to today's Psalm, the 23rd, perhaps the most beloved of them all. It treats us to an exquisite vision of life in the protective care of our Good Shepherd. Could anything be more comforting than the assurance that, if we listen for Jesus's voice and follow him, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives? What the psalm doesn't tell us is that shepherding is hard, dirty, dangerous work. Jesus wasn't kidding about laying down his life for his sheep, because that's what good shepherds had to do. They didn't carry those rods and staffs for fun – they carried them to protect their sheep and themselves from wolves, lions, bears, and bandits. Mary would have known that, and would have understood that Jesus claiming the mantle of the Good Shepherd meant he was volunteering for hard service and a brutal death. When she heard Jesus call himself the Good Shepherd, she must have pondered until her heart was torn in two.

In this Easter season, we rightly celebrate the sacrifice that Jesus made to bring humanity to eternal life. This Mother's Day, we might also pause to remember that the sacrifice wasn't his alone. Mary, his mother, suffered beside him, accompanying Jesus through his Passion without necessarily having the benefit of knowing, as he did, that his Resurrection would come. It was Mary's job to love her child while being powerless to save him. That he saved all of us made her sacrifice worthwhile, but that doesn't mean it was easy.

Tradition tells us that Mary was pretty much perfect. The rest of us mothers are not, and we all do an imperfect job of parenting our children. Some of us struggle to love and honor mothers who, for whatever reason, couldn't love us as we needed. Others cope with children who

blame us for things we did, things we didn't do, and things we couldn't help. Some mothers are absent from their children's lives, whether by choice or by circumstance, and some are waiting by the phone right now for calls from kids they haven't seen or heard from in far too long. Some mothers pray day and night that their children won't fall victim to a drive-by shooting, an overdose, a traffic stop gone wrong or, in Ukraine and other places around the world where war is raging, a bomb or landmine. Even the best of mothers are fallible mortal creatures, doing what we can with what we have to bring up our kids in a world that often makes it impossibly difficult to do so.

The work of mothering comes down to raising good people who are ready to do God's work in this beautiful, broken world. No one did that better than Mary. We Episcopalians don't worship her, but she *is* one of our saints and deserving of our veneration. So this Mother's Day, it's only right to honor the peasant girl from Nazareth who raised our LORD and Savior, making it up as she went along the way mothers everywhere have done since Cain let his sibling rivalry with Abel get out of hand.

For the rest of us, if you and your mother get along well, I wish you a beautiful day together. If not, I pray that you and she will find peace and forgiveness in your relationship, today or whenever you can. For those of you whose mothers have passed, may loving memories comfort you. And for those who never knew your mothers, may fond thoughts of the people who mothered you throughout your life bring you joy. Most of all, I pray that we will always recognize and heed the voice of Mary's Son, raised by his remarkable mother from a tiny baby into the Good Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and restores our souls. Happy Mother's Day, friends! *Amen.*