**Advent IV-Mary**

**Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough**

**December 22, 2024**

Well, we made it through Advent. Christmas is two days away. This Advent our readings mostly focused on John the Baptist. We focused on how he called people to repent-to turn back to God and then to change their lives. We spoke about the prophecies in Isaiah that predicted Jesus’s birth. All our Advent readings called us to recognize God among us. For the first followers of Jesus this was a literal meaning. God walked among them in the man of Jesus. In the great religions of the world, this was unheard of. Gods did not come to earth to dwell among humans. We are lowly, frail, vulnerable creatures. And gods were not born of a human woman.

Today we think of Mary. Mary is called Theotokos -mother of God in the orthodox church. The idea of who Mary was has been passed down to us through our society. It is formed by our cultures and church teachings by the church fathers.

The church fathers said a lot of things about women. St. Augustine said, “Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one”. Other church fathers said that women were temptresses who needed to be controlled. We know that these were attempts to prevent women from continuing in leadership roles and to control family lineages. Controlling woman-controlled blood lines. It is through a woman’s body that human life is sustained and born. So, women were portrayed as helpless, weak, meek, and mild. It’s ironic because anyone -male or female who has witnessed a birth or has seen a mother caring and protecting their young doesn’t use meek and mild to describe it. we use terms like “Tiger Mom, Helicopter Parent, strong, and fiercely protective”.

Mary was a woman. However, because she humbled herself to God she came to be portrayed as meek and mild. These were attributes that were safe for women to possess. They were not a threat to the power structures if they submitted. But saying yes to God is different than saying yes to human power structures. Saying yes to God means that you better be prepared for the unknown. Mary learned to be flexible and she

learned to accept God’s disruptions.

When you look at Mary’s life, she was so much more than a helpmate, submissive, meek and mild. She had to be so much more to survive and for Jesus to survive. In today’s gospel she traveled to the hill country at a time when travel could be dangerous.

Mary learned to be flexible and to trust God. She was strong, brave, and very hospitable to others. Mary had to be welcoming. She didn’t spend the first Christmas with family. She and Joseph spent it with strangers, shepherds, innkeepers, and angels.

We have many icons of Mary. Icons reveal truths through images about God and God’s creation. We can see in icons more truths about Mary. Different cultures represent her different ways, yet we can recognize icons that represent Mary. There are some universal attributes present in the icons. As a note icons are not about literal history. If Mary is wearing a blue veil in an icon it doesn’t mean that Mary actually had on a blue veil. She probably didn’t because colored cloth was saved for the rich. We look to icons to reveal attributes of Mary through facial expressions, body language, and background symbols.

This was my great aunt’s icon of Mary. To Polish people she is known as Matka Boża Czeska-Our Lady of Czeschehovia or The Black Madonna.

If we look at her face, we can see that she is not happy. She is calm, sad, and serious. Jesus is also serious. She is adorned with gold and jewels. She is portrayed as Theotokas. This icon tells us how a particular culture, in a particular place interpreted Mary’s role. Here she is honored as a Queen.

I will be passing around some other images-icons of Mary. Look at them

And see what other attributes you see in her face and demeanor. Please try to put aside what you think Mary should be like. Look at her surroundings. I will give you a moment to look at them.

Do your pictures show Mary as: Serene, vulnerable, strong, flexible, suspicious, faithful, protective, powerful, submissive, mysterious, joyous, surprised, sorrowful, scared, loving, smart, or meek? Knowing what we know of Mary’s life in scripture what attributes do you think we should add to her description? Which are misleading? Which do you connect with?