



**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Elizabeth Blunt Transcript**

“Sanctuary and Song: The Feast of Saint Mary”

Protestants have been both fascinated and puzzled by Mary since the Reformation, preaches the Rev. Elizabeth Blunt on the feast day of Saint Mary the Virgin. “Christmas Mary we think we know; Magnificat Mary not so much.” But listen closer to Mary’s Magnificat and you’ll hear revolution, celebration, and a surprisingly familiar voice. The readings are Isaiah 61:10–11, Psalm 34:1–9, Galatians 4:4–7, and Luke 1:46–55.

Sermon Transcript:

The angel of the Lord encompasses those who fear him and he will deliver them. May I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Good morning, everybody. I have to say I got to celebrate last week, but I think this is the first time I've preached to a house with people in it for a really long time and you just look wonderful. You look wonderful if you're online as well, I just can't really materially support that. I was able to spend some time with my parents back in Michigan in July, which was wonderful. Thank you for sparing me for a little while. Mom and dad still live in the house where I grew up, which is on a little lake and it's absolutely just smothered by trees. There's forest of hickories and beeches, and oaks and maples, many of them way up over 100 feet now. The night before I was set to come back to New York, there was a big storm which was not enough to get any of us out of bed. Really it didn't sound too bad, but then when I took the dog out in the morning, I saw that it had actually been pretty catastrophic. There were huge trees down on all sides. Some of them were split right down the middle, some of them were cut off horizontally like 40 feet up, and a few of them had been pulled out of the ground by the roots.

My first instinct was to cry, which I did for a while. I was so sad about all of those big beautiful trees that I'd known for so long, but then somebody, probably one of my parents said the thing. The thing was it's kind of a miracle, nothing fell on the house. It's like God was holding His hands over us. The scriptures today on this feast of Saint Mary the Virgin are demanding altogether in one voice that we look back and recall and then wonder at and celebrate all the times we have recognized God showing up in our lives. That may feel like a tall order this month, this year when there are so many tall trees down all around us. But I think a lot of us would say that we've experienced God at certain points in our lives as a refuge, and if that's true, we have that in common with the voices in our Bible. God has been a shelter, they say, for generations, a fortress. Psalm 139 describes God as a force that presses upon us behind and before no matter where we go. When Psalm 34 today says the angel of the Lord encompasses those who fear Him, what the Hebrew actually says is the Angel of the Lord encamps about them like a phalanx, that's the picture in my mind, closing ranks and facing outwards to the threats of the world so that we can take some rest.

It's comforting, but I think it's sometimes unnerving to feel contained by God, to feel that everything we

are surrounded by God's attention. The scriptures also ask us to consider God's containment. Yes, that's problematic if we take God seriously as God, sounds a little heretical. Obviously, I am being a little provocative here intentionally, but consider the God of Israel chose to become known as the head of one specific family. God willingly signed the terms of a covenant and bound himself to those people. God revealed a name. God commissioned an actual house. "Tell the Israelites to make me a sanctuary," God said to Moses, 'so that I may dwell among them.'" Then God laid out plans for holy ark in a movable tent where she'd remain among the people for the duration of their journey to the promised land. Now, we've been following the story of King David for a full 11 weeks now. David, near the end of his career, discovered a deep devotional urge to build God a splendid sanctuary in the new capital of Jerusalem, a house with foundations. God declined in no uncertain terms, but then allowed that project under David's heir, under Solomon.

Next week, if you're here, we'll hear Solomon pray at the first temple's dedication ceremony. He'll say this, "Will you God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built." Wise as ever. Orthodox priest, Stephen Friedman says, "This is a scandal." He says the heart of the temple is the scandalous understanding of God dwelling in the midst of the people. Nevertheless, the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies and the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord and remained there until just before the temple was destroyed. Until the year 70, the Jerusalem temple was the heart of Israel shared religious life, was the seat of God's presence, the destination of pilgrimage, was the place toward which one's spirit was always oriented. A beloved place, a family home, if you will, scandalous. But as Christians, we have to say very much in character for the one who also chose to be contained for a time in the body of a poor young woman from Nazareth to live for a time under the care and discipline of a human mother and father. If we were to understand Mary herself as a new temple, as a living, breathing Holy of Holies, we would be right in line with the earliest Christian thinkers trying to make sense of what Jesus was.

God's glory took up residence within human to become human. It's a mind bender. How could the great creator, the originator of the universe be born into the human timeline? How could a human become God's partner in the eternal salvation scheme? This is a mystery, and that holy mystery is part of what draws us to Mary. Part of what's demanded reflection in theology and in poetry and music and art for the last 2000 years. I can't recommend to you more highly a little devotional book by Rowan Williams that's called *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*. It's a little obscure, but you can still get it. It's pretty much exactly what it sounds like, it's a guide to pray with icons of the Virgin, but for me over the course of my faith life, it's been a game changer, spiritual game changer. It's a really effective way of thinking about what the incarnation means for us. Apparently, there are standard types of icons representing the Virgin and child, standard patterns. One of them is called the Eleusa, the Virgin of tenderness. In it, Mary looks out at us holding the baby Jesus in her left hand and gesturing to him with her right hand teaching. But Jesus is all about her. He's wrapped his little right arm around the back of her neck and he's pulling himself up, pressing his feet on her lap so that he can press his cheek against her cheek.

Rowan Williams says this, "If we begin, as most of us tend to, with the notion that God stands at a distance waiting for us to make a move in his direction, this image should give us something of a shock. The Lord here does not wait impassive as we Babylon about our shame and penitence trying to persuade him that we're worth forgiving. His love is instead that of an eager and rather boisterous child scrambling up on his mother's lap with that extraordinary hunger for sheer physical closeness that children will show with loving parents. Mary makes for God not simply a house, but a home. She encamps around God not just as a location, but as a lifelong partner in relationship. Jesus's focus on her

is absolute. Together, these two live out an expression of the life of the trinity into which we're all invited. That constant offering and acceptance of love, a mutual indwelling, a shared containment. Jesus is fully Mary's son and fully her Savior. Mary is entirely his mother and entirely his disciple. I often find, especially when teaching about the Reformation, that Episcopalians have a profound curiosity about Mary. We sense that something's fallen out of our pockets along the great via media and we're not wrong.

One of the priorities of the Reformation was to focus on the authority of scripture of course. It was also to take some of the wind out of the cells of people's devotion to Saints of whom Mary was foremost. Was partly theological, partly political. If you want more details, let me know, I'll talk to you for days. Since the 1500s, Protestants have tended to focus on Mary as obedient and humble and meek. A good model for women, a good model for citizens if you're the man in church. Christmas Mary, we think we know. Magnificat Mary, not so much. What a shame, because this revolution song is also a vessel in a way, it's also a container. Nearly every torn of phrase has been pulled from the Hebrew scriptures, from Isaiah, from the Psalms, from Job, and especially from the stories of women. If you look closely, you'll find Hannah, Rebecca, Leah, Hager, Miriam, and Judith all in the Magnificat, naming and celebrating the times they recognize God showing up. Mary speaks for them. Mary speaks for all of us. Having pondered the miracle of her pregnancy, she says, "Isn't this just like God? This living one I've seen who's truly seen me. This God of Genesis and of the Exodus, and of the prophets, ever the God of the poor and the oppressed, ever the God of justice, ever the God of mercy and compassion. This God, faithful, faithful to his word through all generations. This song is our song. With Jesus's gift of the Spirit, the presence of God that abided in Mary now abides in us. Jesus goes out with us into the world, a movable feast. We bless the Lord with soul and spirit and voice at all times.

Amen.