

“At the Foot of the Cross?”

I am going to ask you to open your hearts and unclutter your minds and lend me your imaginations for a few moments if you will.

My name is Mary, although I have been called many things. Some call me daughter, some call me woman, some have even called me the handmaiden of God. As with all of us, I wear many hats and answer to many things. But the name I prefer is “Mother”. I am the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was riding into Jerusalem earlier this week on a donkey.

I remember well the day that I found out about his coming. A cool breeze teased at my skirts as I moved across the field, balancing an empty jug on my head on my way to the well in our village. Suddenly a stranger appeared to me and fairly shouted, “Greetings, favored one!” I looked behind me to see who in the world he could be talking to but there was no one around except me.

The first thing he said to me after that was, “Don’t be afraid.” And somehow, I wasn’t. I felt nothing but peace as he delivered his unbelievable news. This stranger told me that I had found favor in the eyes of Yahweh, the God of my ancestors. He told me that even though I was still a virgin, I would bear a son who would reign over the house of Jacob. I know this sounds so crazy, but from the very beginning I knew that he was telling me the truth. Perhaps that is why people think of me as a pillar of strength and stoic calm, but I can tell you that I am no different from the rest of you. I am just like anyone else whose life has been filled with both joy and sorrow, faith and doubt.

I have also had many questions for my God. Some of these questions plagued me at the actual birth of my son which happened, in of all places, a stable. As I struggled through my labor pains with no one but my husband there, a dear man but a MAN after all, I wondered if I had somehow fallen OUT of favor Yahweh. And after his birth I remember asking God, "Was I SUPPOSED to give birth to YOUR son in a stable? Did you mean for him to be welcomed by smelly, scruffy shepherds? Who are these strange visitors from the east bringing gifts that are SO inappropriate for a baby?" Surely if my sister Mary or my cousin Elizabeth had been there, they would be of more help and could teach what to do!

But as my son, Jesus – Jesus - that is his name, grew into a boy, all my doubts were relieved. At first, we had to live in the strange land of Egypt because my husband was sure that we were in danger. But finally we were able to return to our home in Nazareth. And there, Jesus was just like every other boy.

I do remember a time though, when we took him to the Temple to have him dedicated. A wise, old man named Simeon was there. When he saw Jesus, this is what he said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

I have pondered those words many times in my heart as I watched Jesus grow into the fine man that he is. I know he is destined for both greatness and suffering and still wonder how I came to be chosen as his mother. Perhaps it is because God knew that I have no wealth or social status, no servants or education that would cause me to raise

Jesus in a pretentious manner. God knew that he would not be spoiled, any more than any Jewish mother spoils her son!

Yes, I think it was to Jesus' advantage and certainly part of God's plan that he was raised in such an ordinary home. God told me that his kingdom would be one in which the powerful would be brought down and the lowly lifted up. He pledged that the hungry would be satisfied and the rich would go away empty. I have done my best to raise Jesus with this in mind. And this is certainly the kingdom that Jesus has preached about.

So I think it was my ordinariness that caught God's attention and made me seem like the logical choice. Because, as it has turned out, his kingdom has been made up of very ordinary people - commoners, carpenters, shepherds and fishermen – indeed you and me. And he has even been able to use his upbringing, stories about farming and the land, about fishing and the sea, to help people understand about God's great love for us all.

What I am trying to say is that I always knew that my son's life would be unlike any others, that he was a gift not just to me but to the world. But that did not render me any less responsible to raise him right, and did not make me any less of a mother in terms of the hopes and dreams and love that I harbor for my son.

I thought about this earlier in the week, when we were traveling from Jericho here to Jerusalem. As we began the journey, Jesus' very words to us were these: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified." I really do not think that his followers understood that he was talking about himself, but I do. The Pharisees and Scribes have

been his enemies from the beginning of his ministry. They are so hypocritical, a “stiff-necked people” as my son calls them. I feel sure they will use their religion to hand Jesus over to the Roman officials on some trumped up charges. And here in Jerusalem that can only mean one thing – death on a cross!

So I couldn't help but wonder as I stood there, watching and listening to the people as they shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David” if these were the very ones who would be shouting “Crucify Him!” in just a few days. I know this is likely to happen because Jesus' messages have been SO radical – love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. The meek will inherit the earth. These are things that people certainly don't want to HEAR from their Rabbi. They want promises of wealth and victory. Of an easy life for all who believe. And I fear that his preaching is what will lead to this great suffering that he speaks of.

I also know that both Jesus and I have been anointed by God to a Divine calling and that we both bear the secrets that are a product of that calling. But I can assure you, I would gladly take his place on that donkey and even on the cross if I must, if it could prevent him from suffering. That is what they call mother love.

There is one other thing that Jesus told us and even I do not understand it, but I am trying to hold onto it. He said that after his suffering and his death that on the third day, he will be raised. Could this be? Will my Son be like Lazarus and come out of the tomb? I have seen so many miracles that he has done with my OWN EYES but THIS is hard for even ME to imagine. Everything seems so uncertain. I don't know what it true and what are merely hopes any more.

The only thing I do know is this: I love Jesus with every breath and fiber of my being – fiercely, unconditionally, because he is a very part of me. I have relished with joy every one of his accomplishments and I suppose this means I will endure with heartache, whatever persecution he must face. As a mother, I can only hope for the best.

Perhaps that is why he has left us this meal – so that we can all have hope. It is so hard for us to believe what we cannot see. And if these things are true, if my Jesus will truly be handed over and killed and if it IS God’s will for him to leave us now, perhaps we will have this table to remind us of what he did. His beloved disciple John told me that when he served it to them, he said that the bread would remind us of his body and the cup of his blood until he is with us again. I don’t understand this either, but if my son says we can find comfort at this table, I can only choose to believe him.

And there is one more thing that I know. I know that I will follow him down the road, into the courts and up the hill of Calvary if I must. I will stand at the foot of the cross until there is not one breath left on my precious son’s lips. I was blessed to bring him into this world and I will be blessed to watch him leave if I must. But I will not give up hope.

Because it was at this table that he promised that he will rise again, that God can perform one more miracle. And so, I will wait and I will hope. I will not abandon our God but I will stay and believe that He will not abandon me either. If I have to stand at the foot of the cross all week and wait to see His glory, then that is where I will be!

And what about you? Do you have a strong enough heart to watch the suffering? Do you have enough faith to believe? Can you imagine that the hateful shouts of “crucify him” can be turned into the joyous proclamation, “HE IS RISEN”? I suppose these next

few days will tell us what will be both our fate and his. I will be waiting and hoping at the foot of the cross. I will be there. Where will you be? Amen.

Maundy Thursday Sermon
Nazareth Presbyterian, 2016