



Let's Talk About Mary and Eve

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Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55

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Today we're marking the feast of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church marks "the solemnity of the Assumption." A doctrine the post-Reformation Church of England "never formally accepted ... one of the major divides with Rome. The feast "disappeared from Anglican worship in 1549 ... only partially to return in some twentieth century Anglican calendars".¹ The Assumption, by the way, is the belief that Mary didn't die but was assumed, taken up into heaven body and soul, following the end of her life on Earth.

Given this why would we choose to celebrate the feast of Mary? Perhaps because Mary or the narrative that attaches to Mary stirs such ... mixed and often strong feelings. The words given to Mary in the Magnificat are beautiful, yes. But they're more that - they name the God she accepts she has the capacity to bear and bring to life in real time aligns with the powerless, those in need, those excluded and cast out. They speak to the heart - we know what they name to be true without coercion.

Yet over time these words, their insistence that those who have, hold and wield power unjustly **will** be held accountable have become tamed, domesticated. Much as has Mary, she's come to serve a place the tradition requires of her. Perhaps this is why she engenders a mix of feelings. On one hand she proclaims divine justice will come to life through her, on the other hand and over time her acceptability appears contingent on her remaining virginal, pure, holy and untouchable. As if

¹<https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/do-anglicans-celebrate-the-assumption-of-mary/>

Mary was necessary in a narrative that tells of her as the virginal recipient of a Father God's intention to deliver a first born Son who will save the world.

The person of Mary, an unwed pregnant teenager, gets a little overshadowed by what it leads to and the story of how it came to be. I want to stop and ask for a moment, from your own life experience, perhaps thinking back in time, that vulnerable teenage time, do you remember the associations attached to being an unwed pregnant teenager? The stigma and shame, the fear of economic and social ruin, the actions taken to disappear, deny and conceal. For the young woman who was pregnant, not so much for the man - harder to prove I guess. Why is/was this do you suppose? What foundational story informs the blessing of bearing new life to be this way?

Narratives are powerful things. We story our world. The way we do so informs how we think, see, interpret and understand the world, they shape who we are. We're recipients of narratives that have shaped us yet we too are the story tellers, we determine how those narratives will be told, they're not yet ended. However to do so we need to know how the story we receive got its shape, how it was formed, then we can better see how we've been formed, then we can choose more intentionally how we tell it.

The place of Mary is very much influenced by the place of Eve in our tradition. Irenaeus of our tradition puts it this way, "Eve, having become disobedient, was made the cause of death both for herself and for all the human race. ...the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened through the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve bound through unbelief, this the Virgin Mary loosed through faith."² Eve is a character in a mythical creation story. A story our tradition over time has told in such a way that Eve is cast as the perpetrator of 'The Fall.'

I, like many of you, receive the Garden of Eden story and the Genesis 2 version that tells of The Fall from the pages of a bible in English, translated

² http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2074-77052017000100005

from language to language across cultures and through time. Every language has its nuance and culture, every translator chooses their best understanding from their sense of what a text or story intends. I'm not a Hebrew scholar so I looked for someone who is to ask about this creation myth. This is some of what I learned from their way of reading:

The story was written for a largely pagan audience who understood evil as residing in nature for nature was a moral agent able to do good or bad.

The essence of the Garden of Eden story is that humans are created with free will, able to choose. Choices have consequences, the consequences are what distinguish between the two choices presented to the primordial couple: between a benign, immortal existence in a utopia whose daily existence is without consequence or a mortal life in which consequences follow choice ... such consequences, both good and bad, set it apart from life in Eden.

The experience of suffering and joy are not due to the deeds of capricious gods. Nature is morally inert. Humans are responsible for their actions.

The primordial couple isn't portrayed as disobedient nor their suffering a punishment administered by God. Humans are portrayed as creatures capable of their own choices, as are the consequences with which they must live. They knew what would happen should they ignore God's warning. But, they weighed the consequences and made their choice.

The Garden story is about the exercise of free will and the lesson that those graced with free will must also bear the consequences of their choices for good or bad.³

Adam and Eve chose this together but Eve was the first to step into the mortal world with consequences, toward life with all that brings. Joseph Campbell writes "Woman brings life into the world. Eve is the mother of this temporal world. Formerly you had a dreamtime paradise there in the Garden of Eden - no time, no birth, no death - no life."⁴ Let's not forget a myth's a narrative to help make sense of the way things are, the way the world is.

What has this to do with Mary? Mary stands in the lineage of Eve. A woman with a choice to make that would have consequences, significant

³ <http://learn-biblical-hebrew.com/hebrew-scripture/garden-of-eden-story/genesis-216-17/>

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/983492-the-christian-story-amounts-to-a-refusal-to-affirm-life>

consequences. Mary was not forced to say “Yes” in fact if common sense prevailed she’d have run for the hills. Yet she **chose** to say “Yes.” **Then** it became real. “Yes” to conceiving, making real in time, birthing that divine life is knowable in human form. Revealing our potential, capacity, responsibility to incarnate and enact the divine priority for life. Unbelievable, inconceivable and yet by saying “Yes” initiating the consequence - that it is real.

Yet the narrative of our tradition is written by men of a particular time and culture. Exacerbated by the patriarchal culture in which they were embedded, it largely colonizes the radical part and act of this woman and the lineage of faith filled women before and continuing since Mary. Once granted the authority of tradition, especially a God tradition, to question and probe the authority of such men is fraught.

I don’t want this to be a rally cry against the misogyny and patriarchy of our tradition. I want to avoid the associated battle cries, words of anger and rage, power and might. I don’t want to feed the fires that have burned such way too long. I want instead to pay attention to Mary and to Eve and their alternative way. Their way that breathes life into, asserts, insists and acts so in real time the divine priority for inclusion and justice is made real. Their dignified stepping toward and into the messy complexity of life, with all this will bring. Accepting that actions have consequences, so we are to be mindful and careful and, with aware thoughtfulness, to act **with** others both like and unlike and yes, those we find most challenging as well!

We’ve inherited a narrative, good and bad, often confused and confusing. Let us choose to be aware of our inheritance for this narrative has not yet ended. How it will be told, the influence it will have and how it may end that’s in the telling and we have our part in the telling.