



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Midrashin' it with Mary
Advent 4, Year B
Sunday, December 20, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

There's an old rabbi with the fabulous name of Ben Bag Bag who offers this advice on reading Scripture: "Turn it and turn it again, for all is in it; see through it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing that works better than it."¹

I came across this quote in our little group study of a book on midrash. Midrash, you've heard me explain many times, is that rabbinical practice of reading between the lines of Scripture. A good midrash fills out the story, smooths transitions, makes connections, explains some of the inherently confusing passages of the Bible. These readings are like putting flesh onto a skeleton -- each one renders an entirely different and unique being. In Judaism, the words of the Torah were given by God and then it was the work of God's people to interpret it, to turn it over and over again, to see what came to the surface at every turning. Ben Bag Bag said everything in the world was contained in Torah.

But if you were raised, say, on a *sola scriptura* sort of Protestantism, or if you've just never been encouraged to treat the Bible with imagination, midrash can feel like a queasy sort of undertaking. There is no doubt you're reading meanings into the text that weren't on the surface. Midrash claims that all the readings are there, waiting to be discovered. But Christianity tamped down on what might be called our own midrash — for lots of reasons, one that it became the religion of the Empire; we codified our texts and proclaimed canon and developed dogma. By the time of the Reformation, filling between the lines of the text would be about as popular as the pope.

But you read the stories of Mary and it's like Scripture is begging you to engage your imagination. The woman birthed God into the world, and this Sunday features one of only a handful mentions of her in the Bible. It's not a small or unimportant mention, but she's a minor character in the New Testament, as understated and mythical as Eve, her archetypal counterpoint in the saga of salvation.

We actually have very different interpretations of Mary even within Scripture itself. Matthew's account of the conception of Jesus leaves Mary's voice out entirely, all of the communication from the angel runs through Matthew's main man, Joseph. If you've ever wanted to read a story about an unplanned pregnancy without consideration of the woman -- look no further. Luke, objectively the best gospel, gives us the story we have today, along with Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, and the Magnificat, Mary's song of revolution. So which is she? The silent vessel, or the bold revolutionary?

Before the New Revised Standard Christianity was set forth, the tradition around Mary caught fire and ran. Silent vessel she was not. Early accounts that didn't make it into canon include tales of Mary's own miraculous conception to elderly parents, who promised to dedicate their baby to the temple even if it were a girl. Baby Mary can walk by the age of six months, clearly remarkable, and at age three she is taken to the Temple. She's set upon the steps of the temple and her feet suddenly compel her to dance,

¹ Found in *Reading the Book* by Visotzky.

the joy and wonder of the moment takes hold and she can't keep it in -- all Israel sees her spirit and falls in love with her. The tradition said that she was taken into the Holy of Holies and grew up there, fed by the hand of an angel. Mary performs miracles in these apocryphal accounts, and in some stories, all it takes is for Mary to feel pity for someone for their evil spirits to be driven out. Some stories relate how Mary gave birth with the strength of a man, not requiring a midwife, and that the cave where Jesus was born shone with light. In a really bizarre source called the Odes of Solomon, the Holy Spirit milks God's breasts and mixes it with the milk of Mary's bosom. And some of the best early stories about Mary sadly can't even be told from the pulpit, they're that racy.²

Turn it and turn it again. Find the whole world in it.

And it's wild how the tales of Mary do turn. The early church fathers, writing soon after these apocryphal accounts, become hyper-focused on the virginity of Mary. Of course they do. They're monastics. They spend countless pages arguing for her sinlessness on account of her virginity, as if sex is the ultimate act of the defilement of humanity. They have just enough of the Platonic horror at the foul, decaying, hairy, excreting, fragile human body that you can see how much it unnerves them to proclaim that that same body will be redeemed, that Jesus arrived through that body.³

And I think all these ways of viewing Mary pinpoint what we're afraid of in the act of Midrash. What if what we find is only what we want to find? What if this page is actually a mirror, and we see only what we bring to the text?

To which the answer is, yes, you will find that. If you're honest with yourself, you'll probably find that first. There's always some aspect of one's initial approach to God that is childlike — I don't mean just in innocence, but also unpostured, self-focused, needy.

But it won't be long in this pursuit before you start talking about what you find with your neighbor, who will have a very different opinion, and if you live in right enough relationship with those neighbors, you might find that they're good company to talk with about it. You'll find more meaning the more you explore, the most basic subjects of the Christian life inexhaustible; turn it and turn it again.

And as you do that, you'll find these words entering your prayers. You'll learn to see through it, as old Ben Bag Bag said. You'll find that it isn't a mirror, but the very thing that lets you set down the mirror of tyrannical self-obsession. You will still ask for what you need, but you'll begin to echo Mary's words today: "Let it be done to me according to your will." You can see where Jesus got it, teaching us to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done." You can see whose words he held in his darkest hour, sweating blood in the garden, begging for the cup to be taken from him: "Not my will, but yours be done."

A hard prayer, worthy of everything from birth to death. Who knows what you'll begin to see through it?

² Sources include the Protoevangelium of James (2nd century), the Arabic Infancy Gospel (6th century), the Acts of Peter (2nd or 3rd century), and the Odes of Solomon (3rd century).

³ See Tertullian, *The Flesh of Christ* for vivid description of the womb's viscera while he argues for Christ's full humanity.