

## MARY, MOTHER OF OUR LORD | AUGUST 14, 2022

ISAIAH 61:7-11 | PSALM 34:1-9 | GALATIANS 4:4-7 | LUKE 1:46-55

If you've recently gotten married, attended a wedding, or—God forbid—paid for a wedding, you may have run into the “wedding tax.” The wedding tax describes a strange phenomenon where there is one price for a cake, a DJ, and a ring. But when you order a wedding cake, hire a wedding DJ, or buy a wedding ring, suddenly the price gets much higher. Since people don't get married often, businesses assume they'll spend above their budget. (And they do.)

There's something similar that we run into in church. You can think of it as a “holiness tax.” Candles, certificates, and books might be relatively inexpensive, until you start trying to buy them for church. Put “holy” in front of something, and suddenly it seems to cost twice as much. Since we use these things to objects in our worship, businesses assume that we're not just going to use some cheap candles from IKEA. (But we are.)

The idea of holiness is front and center in today's gospel reading. Mary proclaims that “the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” So as we join Mary's song today, we should stop and think about what exactly we mean by “holiness” and what Mary has to teach us.

In the Hebrew Bible, holiness is a term used to describe God. God is called the Holy One. And wherever God is present becomes holy as well. (Think of Moses and the burning bush.) As Mary knows, even God's name is holy. And the traditions and practices that are used to worship God are holy as well.

And you get similar ideas in much of the New Testament. Jesus's prayer, which we heard a couple weeks ago, speaks of God's name as holy. Peter says that Jesus is the holy one of God. The apostles refer to the risen Jesus as the “holy one.” So even though they've expanded their understanding of holiness to include Jesus, there's the same basic meaning.

So far, so good. But this is where things start to go awry. Because we often assume that holiness is a noun. If something is holy—related to God—it has to be kept away from people. The two shouldn't mix. After all, when someone tells you that something is holy, what they're really saying is *Don't touch it*. Our presence might profane what is supposed to be holy.

You can even think about this in our own context. Sometimes if we have a small group for a liturgy, I like to invite people up to celebrate communion around the altar. People generally like doing that, and they walk up front and everything's great. But when they get to the altar rail, they start hesitating and get a worried look on their faces. Because they're not sure if they're allowed inside or not. (They are.) But it's easy to understand why they're confused. Because this space was built with the altar bumped back from the assembly in its own alcove. And we interpret that to mean that there is something of God happening there, and it needs to be kept away from people.

The belief latent in the architecture and assumed in our heads is that God and creation need to be kept separate. We talk about holiness as if it was a noun. As if there were a finite amount of it in the world, and once something holy comes into contact with the messiness of human life, it's never quite as holy as it used to be. God is here, so don't get too close or you'll spoil it.

But God confounds our expectations. In fact, while we often try to protect the holiness of God, God is completely unbounded by our efforts. In fact, we see the majesty of God not by pondering God from arm's length but through God's relentless desire to get involved in creation. And we see that clearly through the song of Mary.

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To understand Mary's song, you don't need to be a Bible scholar. You just need to know some grammar. Because you can get the core of her message just through the verbs and indirect objects. What does God do? God does great things. God shows strength. God scatters. God brings down. God lifts up. God fills. God sends away. God comes to the aid. And what are the indirect objects? Who is involved in God's actions? Those who fear him. The proud. The powerful. The lowly. The hungry. His child Israel. Our ancestors. Abraham and his descendants forever.

Put those two together, and you get a powerful image of how God acts for us. Mary tells us that God does not need to be protected from human concerns but that God's very being is wrapped up in the welfare of God's people. Mary tells us that starting all the way back from Abraham and passing through generation upon generation all the way through to her life, God has been getting involved. And, here's the important part, God's involvement in the messiness of actual human lives doesn't make God any less holy. Just the opposite. We see God's holiness precisely through God's compassion and love for humanity. When we say that God is holy, just as we do every week when we celebrate communion, we are joining Mary in celebrating God's action *for us*.

And the reason we sing Mary's song is because God's action continues to overflow into our lives. The incarnation might be a once-for-all event, but the desire of God stretches from far before and far after, reaching all the way back from in the beginning down into the depths of our joys and sorrows. When St. Paul calls us "heirs of God" in today's reading from Galatians, this is what he means. That we are recipients of God's constant self-giving. God's giving to Abraham, the Israelites, Mary, the apostles, and each and every one of us.

God makes us a holy people. We are holy not because we are well behaved or pious or religious or nice. We are holy because, grafted into the body of Christ, we become heirs of God. We are holy not because of who we are but because of who God is and who God forms us to be.

This flips holiness around on its head. We don't profane what is holy. But God makes holy what is pedestrian. God redeems creation not from a distance but in and through the lives of people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit. People like Mary and Abraham and St. Paul. And also people like us.

One of my favorite images of this comes from some Gordon Lathrop book. I tried to track it down this week, but I couldn't get the exact page. But he used to teach liturgy down at the Lutheran seminary in Philadelphia. In one of his books, there's a bit in it about reverencing the altar. When the procession comes to the altar, the acolytes, assisting ministers, and presiding minister bow as a sign of awe and respect. And at some point, he started realizing that wasn't quite enough. So at the beginning of each service, he would process in, reverence the altar, and then turn around and reverence the assembly.

That's what holiness is. That's exactly the gospel that Mary proclaims to us. And that's why we join our voices in her song today. Because in the resurrection of Jesus, God looks with favor on us and transforms us into a holy people. Not a people set apart or a people set above, but a people grafted into the body of Christ that loves and serves the world.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor