

In Mary's Footsteps¹

Let me begin our meditation on Mary, the mother of Jesus, by turning to a passage about her that you may have missed. In the twelfth chapter of Revelation we read:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Of course, there can always be debate whether Revelation's author was thinking about Mary. Most Christians have made the connection in some way between this visionary Queen of Heaven, if you will, clothed in the brightness of the sun and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

It's natural to ask what is it that Mary did that brought her to such a glorious destiny. That's what I'd like to look at with you this morning.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on December 7, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

You and I certainly know Mary as the young woman who gave birth to Jesus. We know how she was approached by the angel, Gabriel, and became pregnant, not by her fiancée or betrothed, Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit.

Imagine the difficulty and shame involved. Adulterous women were stoned in those days. So, Mary was in a very tense circumstance. At the very least, Mary endured the disapproving stares from the neighbors. Early on, even Joseph thought that Mary had betrayed him.

Add to the shame the trip to Bethlehem for the purpose of satisfying the Roman government's decree. Not only did Mary endure the first trip between Nazareth and Bethlehem, a 3 to 5 day walk. They also, as we learn in Matthew's gospel, made an unscheduled second, longer trip across the frontier into Egypt.

The mother who carried in womb and arms, Jesus, the savior of the world, endured a hard existence. There was danger from social ostracism, danger from travel, weather, bandits, and exposure.

What you and I learn from Mary in her hardship is that this life of discipleship is not a trouble-free existence. Don't let anyone tell you that to be a Christian is a peaceful and prosperous lifestyle. Mary brought Jesus into the world and there's a sense in which all of us are called to bring Jesus

into our world. And that is going to be difficult. We may suffer ridicule or loss of friends or even family who don't want us to have a commitment to God.

No one had a better grasp on the difficulty of Christian commitment than Charles Sheldon who wrote a devotional novel, In His Steps. Most of the characters in that book lost friends, disappointed their families, or suffered some form of persecution as they made their commitments to always ask, "What would Jesus do?" Mary pioneers the way of the difficult life of discipleship.

A second feature of Mary's life that inspires us is her simple devotion as an observant Jewish woman. She and Joseph bring their child to the Temple to be circumcised and dedicated to God. Then conform to the Jewish marriage customs. Luke tells us that when Jesus was 12, his parents were among those who made the required pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Most of the scenes when we see Mary we see her set against Jewish observance—marriage, dedication, holidays.

Mary never took the attitude that she was destined to become a prominent figure in a new religion and therefore didn't need the structure of her Judaism. God blesses her for this.

There is a quiet power and promise in living an observant disciplined life. If you wish for God to use you, to inspire

you, come to church. Take 30 minutes a day to spend time alone with God. Pay your pledge. Someone says that coming to church doesn't make a person holy or righteous. That's true. But neither does eliminating the structure of routine religious observance. Mary teaches us something powerful about the nature of the life that God blesses.

Our final observation is that Mary was in every sense a disciple of Jesus. She, in other words, understood perfectly that giving birth to the world's savior—as momentous as that was not the last word in her service. She also followed him as a learner or apprentice. I like that word apprentice as a description of discipleship. Apprentice suggests on the job training from an expert. When we are apprentices to Jesus we get on the job instruction for the job of living this life.

Mary followed Jesus. This is why we see her as one of those who grieved at Jesus' death. We also note that Mary is present in the Upper Room at the Pentecost celebration when the Holy Spirit descends.

Do you remember the orange juice ad that ran, "It's not just for breakfast anymore?" About Mary we might say, she's not just for Christmas anymore. We certainly see her prominently in the Christmas story. But she also appears through the narrative of Jesus' ministry. She is at the foot of the cross in the

crucifixion. She appears again at Pentecost—even after Jesus' ascension.

Clearly, Mary found the ideal Christian life, namely following Jesus. There is a marvelous example in the whole course of Mary's life. Mary teaches us by example that abiding with Jesus, sticking with him, sticking it out with him is the calling of every Christian.

Put all this together and suddenly you have a quiet, even hidden life that is so profound and powerful that the Book of Revelation envisions Mary as the queen of Heaven. She even stands up against the great dragon that would hurt or destroy every good thing.

Imagine the prospect of sharing her path! You and I can do so by doing those exquisitely simple but powerful things that Mary did. We can say "yes" to God's will for our lives, by not giving up when being a Christian proves difficult, when we maintain the bread and butter disciplines of faith—worship, prayer, generosity, and care of others. We abide with Jesus, that is we do everything we need to in order to always feel close to him. And following Mary's example we also come to experience something of the joy and fruitfulness of she whom John called the Woman Clothed with the Sun.