

REFLECTION FOR THE FEAST OF OUR LADY OF MT. CARMEL

16 July 2020
Baltimore Carmel
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The gospel reading for the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is taken from the concluding section of the Passion Narrative as recounted in the Gospel of John. Jesus is dying. He has been tortured, mocked, and sentenced to death—capital punishment by way of crucifixion. The carpenter was forced to carry the wood for his execution to a hill outside the great city of Jerusalem. There, Jesus was stripped naked, his arms stretched out, his wrists nailed to the beam. Then soldiers used ropes to hoist him up and nail his feet to the upright stake.

Jesus is dying: He cannot breathe, his diaphragm is collapsing; he is being asphyxiated. As death comes over him, Jesus calls *out to* his mother: “Woman, here is your son.” He entrusts his deeply loved mother to his deeply loved disciple and friend: “Here is your mother.” Jesus gasps: “‘It is finished.’” His head sags and he gives up his spirit” (John 19:26-28).¹

What might we make of this scene so soaked in sadness and anguish? From a human and compassionate perspective, Jesus, in his dying moments, performs an act of filial piety, entrusting his mother’s well-being to the care of a beloved disciple and friend. Biblical scholars do not dismiss such a reading out of hand, but given the highly symbolic character of the Johannine Gospel, they dig deeper. Adele Reinhartz argues that “a clue to the meaning of the

¹ The author of the Fourth Gospel refers to the mother of Jesus only twice—at a wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1-11) and in today’s text (Jn 19: 27-29), but *neither passage discloses her given name*—Miriam in Hebrew, Mary in English. The *Gospel of Luke* mentions the name of the mother of Jesus—Mary (*Maryam* or *Mariam* in Aramaic) 12 times (Luke 1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 41, 47, 56; 2:15, 16, 19, 34). The writer of the *Acts of the Apostles* names her once (*Acts* 1: 14). The *Gospel of Matthew* refers to the mother of Jesus 5 times, and only once outside the infancy narratives (*Matthew* 1: 16, 18, 20; 2:11; 13:55). The *Gospel of Mark* mentions her 3 times (*Mark* 6:3, 3:31, 32). Still, these references provide no information about the Jewish woman who gave birth to the one whom we confess as Lord and Messiah.

passage may be lie in a comparison between these two characters.”² Each is defined by the quality of intimacy with Jesus: mother and beloved disciple and friend. Scholars suggest that a further clue may lie in the gospel’s use and “emphasis on the language of dwelling”³ or abiding. “The mother will now dwell [abide] with her new son, just as Jesus dwelt [abided] among humankind,” just as the promised Spirit-Paraclete will descend upon and dwell [abide] with the disciples.⁴ The book of *Acts* reports that after the ascension, the disciples—men and women—meet in an upper room of a house to pray. Miriam /Mary/, the mother of Jesus, (Luke names her) is with them. Christian iconography reckons more and depicts Mary with the disciples at the descent of Spirit-*ruah* (*Acts* 1:14; 2:1-4).

On this Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, let us take the opportunity to re-encounter the Jewish peasant woman from Galilee who is the mother of Jesus. Miriam /Mary/ of Nazareth remains elusive, hidden, nearly invisible in the New Testament; yet, Christian iconography and hagiography make her visible—fashions her through a patriarchal lens, confines her to pedestals, renders her difficult, well-nigh impossible for an ordinary woman of any era to imitate. Critical biblical scholarship and feminist theology can help us find Miriam, the flesh and blood Jewish woman, mother, disciple.

Mary of Nazareth grew up and lived under the Roman *imperium* which manifested its rule in Galilee through the line of Herodian client-kings. The population of the obscure village of Nazareth was comprised roughly of 300 to 400 people—most of whom were peasants working their own land or tenant farmers working land belonging to others, along with a few artisans and crafts persons and, perhaps, merchants. Archaeological findings show that in villages like

² Adele Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John,” 391, 392, in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994).

³ Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John,” 391, 392, in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*.

⁴ Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John,” 392, in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*.

Nazareth, family dwellings consisted of one or two cramped rooms, covered with a thatched roof. Often three or four of such houses were joined by a common wall and faced a common open-air courtyard, forming a compound where extended family groups might live. The common courtyard functioned as a shelter for domestic animals as well as a kitchen with its “shared oven, cistern that held water, and millstone for grinding grain.” Theirs was subsistence living—growing their own food, building their own shelter, sewing their own clothes “from cloth that they spun and wove ... from [the wool] of sheep.”⁵

Nazareth would have had a small synagogue where men and women gathered to pray, to listen to the reading and interpretation of Torah, and to receive instruction. More than likely, male heads of households led synagogue services, and settled the community’s disputes; but scholars observe that in such small rural villages, women would have been active in synagogue and public life. Moreover, as Elizabeth Johnson surmises, “Celebrations of the life cycle, such as circumcisions, marriage feasts, and funerals would also [have entailed] the participation of women according to local tradition.”⁶

Although married to Joseph, a carpenter with a skilled trade, like every other village peasant-woman, Mary would have worked long hours each day. Certainly, she would have cared for her child and, perhaps, from time to time, the children of other women. Each morning she would have risen early to draw water and prepare a meal; she would have collected firewood, planted and tended a vegetable and herb garden, sewed and mended the family clothes. Quite likely, her face and skin would have been scorched and weathered by the sun, her hands rough, her feet calloused, her back sore, and sometimes, her patience worn thin. Still, Mary’s life was

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 141-143.

⁶ Mary F. Foskett, “Mary the Mother of Jesus,” 426, in *The Oxford Handbook of the New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*. Benjamin H. Dunning, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 168.

not without joy or gladness: she enjoyed the intimacy of marital affection, the warmth of kin-folk, the confidences of women friends, the conviviality of village-community. As a mother, Mary would have been awed at the birth of her son: surely, she marveled at holding him, nursing him, singing to him—simply looking at her infant Jesus. Surely, she smiled as he took his first steps or discovered birds or gazed up at the stars. Surely, Mary taught Jesus to be attentive to and to listen to those around him, to refrain from hasty judgment, to be compassionate and to help others as he could. Surely, Mary taught Jesus to pause and to ponder and to pray.

This brief sketch reminds us that Mary of Nazareth was a flesh and blood Jewish woman who lived in first century Galilee. For many of us, this portrait contrasts sharply with the Mary of popular Catholic devotion and iconography. The Galilean peasant woman is not the blue-cloaked Mary whose head is tilted to one-side, whose eyes are modestly cast downward, whose lips bear the hint of a demure smile. It is the Galilean peasant woman who is bowed down with grief at the foot of the cross, weeping for her dying son. This is the woman whom Our Lady of Mt. Carmel shows us today.

To return to the Gospel reading: Faithful to Jesus to the end are two persons whom he loved deeply—his mother and his disciple and friend. In the Fourth Gospel, these two figures function symbolically bringing the past and future together: Jesus' mother represents the past, the beloved disciple represents the future.⁷ From the beginning, Jesus' mother has been a witness to his ministry; her presence at the cross “represents the continuation of his [now concluded] earthly ministry.” The presence of the beloved disciple symbolically connects “the Jesus tradition and the life of the faith community.”⁸ Finally, in the Johannine Gospel, “at the heart of

⁷ Gail R. O'Day, “John,” 300, in *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. (London/Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁸ O'Day, “John,” 300, *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

Jesus' ministry is the creation of a new family of God."⁹ The members of this family will not be "born of the flesh," Jesus says to Nicodemus, but rather "of water and spirit" (Jn 3: 1-6). The members of this family will "claim *no* 'father' except God alone . . . and [they will] worship God in spirit and in truth," Jesus tells the Samaritan woman (Jn 4: 23-24).¹⁰ To belong to God's new creation, to belong to this new family, means to follow the 'way' that Jesus taught. Moreover, following that 'way' requires that we root our fundamental identity *not* in national dominance or religious orthodoxy, *not* in culture or political affiliation, *not* in racial primacy or ethnic purity, *not* in gender superiority or sexual orientation. Rather, we are to root our fundamental identity in concrete praxis of love of God and love of neighbor. The author of the First Letter of John writes: "Whoever does not love abides in death." And again: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and in action" (1 Joh 3: 14, 18).

In our broken and hurting world, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel shows us the face of the *Theotokos* (the God bearer, the mother of God). She turns us to the Galilean peasant woman, Miriam of Nazareth, mother of the crucified Jesus . . . our mother.

Having been driven into exile by gangs of soldiers sent to kill her son, Miriam of Nazareth has much in common with mothers around the world who face down danger, detention, and death, risk abuse and rape to cross foreign borders so that their children might live and thrive.

Having worked long hours to provide for her family, Miriam of Nazareth has much in common with impoverished mothers around the world—ordinary and poor women of indigenous

⁹ O'Day, "John," 300, *The Women's Bible Commentary*; see Jean Zumstein, "The Purpose of the Ministry and Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John," 340, in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ See, Wes Howard-Brook, "John's Gospel's Call to be Reborn of God," 84, 91, in *The New Testament—Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, Wes Howard-Brook and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

communities, women of color, white women—mothers whose children are intentionally deprived of food and medicine and health care because of race, ethnicity, religion, or culture through the indifference and cruelty of their governments.

Having cared for a friend’s or neighbor’s child sick from disease in rural Galilee, Miriam of Nazareth has much in common with mothers around the world whose husbands or children, relatives or friends have suffered and died from COVID-19.

Here in our fractured and failing nation, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel shows us the face of the *Theotokos* (the God bearer, the mother of God). She turns us to the Galilean peasant woman, Miriam of Nazareth, mother of the crucified Jesus . . . our mother.

With a son was arrested and brutalized by law enforcement; tried, convicted, and executed on trumped-up charges of sedition and blasphemy, Miriam of Nazareth has a great deal in common with the mothers of Tamir Rice and Andy Lopez, the mothers of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the mothers of Tanisha Anderson and Natasha McKenna, the mothers of Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, the mothers of Amadou Diallo and Botham Jean, the mothers of Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor.

As George Floyd *lay under the weight of white supremacy*, gasping for air, struggling to breathe, he called out to *his* mother. And at that moment, he summoned *all* mothers.¹¹ He summoned the anguished woman captured by Titus Kaphar on the cover of *Time* Magazine; he

¹¹ Watching the televised recording of the protest marches in the days that followed the murder of George Floyd, I saw a woman holding a poster that read: When George Floyd called out for his mama, he called for mothers everywhere.” See, Vanessa Magic, “When George Floyd Called for His Mama, I Felt Pain—Because I’m Someone’s Mama,” <https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/when-george-floyd-called-for-his-mama-i-felt-pain-because-im-someones-mama> (June 10, 2020); Diana Spalding, “When George Floyd called out for his mama, mothers everywhere answered,” <https://www.mother.ly/news/george-floyd-called-for-mothers-everywhere> (June 04, 2020).

summoned Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Mary Mother of the Oppressed; he summoned Our Lady of Ferguson, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. As George Floyd *lay pressed under the knee of white supremacy*, gasping for air, struggling to breathe, he called out to *his* mother. At that moment, Miriam of Nazareth embraced him and took him as her son.