



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “Ponder These Things”

© by Myrna Adams West, Lay Minister

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### Centering Thoughts

*From now on all people will call me blessed.* Luke 2: 19, King James Version (KJV)

*But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.* Luke 2:19, KJV

*When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.* John Lennon & Paul McCartney

*No matter what else you believe about Jesus, you have to admit that Mary and Joseph raised a remarkable son.* Donna Waddell, Co-founder of Mountain Light UU Church (Ellijay, Georgia)

### Sermon

The season of Advent is an appropriate time to reflect on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Certainly, like all expectant mothers, Mary would have spent some time before the birth of her first child wondering, considering, pondering what her child would be like. If, indeed, as the Christian gospels indicate, Mary was informed ahead of time that her son would be the Messiah foretold by the ancient Hebrew prophets in the books commonly referred to by Christians as the Old Testament, then she must have had much to anticipate—not all of it good. But the gospels do not tell us much about Mary. They don’t tell us what Mary knew, if anything, about her baby’s future.

When I was growing up at Bethabara Baptist Church out in Oconee County in the 1950s and 60s, we didn’t talk much about Mary except at Christmas and Easter. How I loved her role in the Christmas story. In my active imagination, I could see her shaking in fear as the Angel Gabriel announced that she would have a baby even though she wasn’t yet married. And I liked the story of her visit to her older cousin Elizabeth whose baby John, grew up to be the Baptizer. Having known pregnant mothers, I understood what it meant when Elizabeth said the baby moved in her womb as Mary appeared at her door. And I envisioned Mary and Joseph’s long, arduous journey to Bethlehem with Mary riding on the back of a donkey during the latter stages of her pregnancy, and I felt her disappointment when there was no room for them in the inn. Having grown up on a farm, I had no trouble thinking of the animals in the barn moving over to make room for Mary and

Joseph and watching as the tiny baby was born. And I always assumed it was she who “wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.” I thought of Mary, holding the newborn Jesus in her arms and moving the blanket back to show his little face to the visiting shepherds. And I thought the line in the Gospel of Luke that says, “But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, KJV), was lovely and poetic. To ponder—“to wonder about”—seemed like such a natural thing to do when one had seen and heard all the things that Mary had seen and heard—angels and supernovas and shepherds and other signs and wonders.

Mary does make a few appearances in the New Testament between the birth and the death of her oldest son, but there really aren't too many references to her. As is probably the case with Jesus himself, much of the mythology associated with Mary was made up long after her death.

Much of it seems to have originated in the Second and Third Centuries of the Common Era—the early years of what is today the Roman Catholic Church—and most assuredly was designed to appeal to the population of the Western World of the time. Later we see depictions of the various Marys, such as Mary, the Queen of Heaven, covered in jewels and wearing a crown in the High Middle Ages or Mary the Courtly Lady in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century or Maria Dolorosa during the Black Plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century (from: *Kathryn Hughes: rereading Alone of All Her Sex by Marina Warner*).

Shirley Ann Ranck, who wrote the UU Women's Federation curriculum, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, notes that when Mary “became the Queen of Heaven . . . [she was] shown in paintings with many of the symbols of the ancient goddesses”—crowned or standing on the crescent moon, or with stars circling her head, standing on sacred trees, or holding the baby Jesus in poses reminiscent of the poses of ancient goddesses, such as Isis, holding her son Horus. Ranck refers to Geoffrey Ashe's suggest[ion] that “the need of the people for a female deity was so great that the Christian Church might not have survived without the elevation of Mary to this exalted position.”

As the mother of God, himself, Mary was exalted, credited with countless miracles, hailed as the intercessor. Her unique position, though lower than that of God himself or the very son she gave birth to, empowered women. Ranck suggests that Mary's purported purity gave women an escape from the role of “submissive wife and bearer of children.” Many women escaped into convents and some reached the highest ranks of their orders, their earthly powers equaling or surpassing those of their male counterparts. At the very least, in the convents, “they developed skills and talents in the arts and in the administration of large estates” (Ranck, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, Part 2, 28*).

Indeed, in her song of praise, called the “Magnificat,” found in the Gospel of Luke, Mary predicted that people would call her blessed, and her prediction is true, but there is a darker side to Mary's advancement.

As Ranck points out, even though Mary was depicted as seated on the throne with the Father and the Son, she “was not made a full-fledged member of the Godhead. The Church used her to satisfy the need for a female presence in Christianity but also to keep women in a subordinate

position.” As Ranck explains, “[Mary’s] purity as a virgin was exalted and women were taught to strive for that purity and to obey the divine will. At the same time she is, of course, a mother, and women were taught to bear as many children as possible. But Mary did it while remaining a virgin; other women,” Ranck points out, “in order to be mothers, must be tainted by sexuality. If they remain pure they cannot be like Mary the Mother; if they become mothers they cannot be like Mary the Virgin” (28).

In the last 25 years or so, Mary’s image has taken on a Feminist transformation. Modern novelists have depicted Mary not as the passive obedient, subservient, “handmaiden,” but as an independent, sometimes rebellious, young woman who knew who she was and what she wanted. In Colin Toibin’s 2012 novel, *The Testament of Mary*, Mary does not believe in the resurrection. She even tells some of Jesus’ followers who are trying to confirm his divinity, “I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it.” Lesley Hazleton’s *Mary: A Flesh and Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother*, treats Mary, as one reviewer says, “as the Great Mother Goddess who is ‘short, wiry, with dark olive skin and the trace of a mustache on her upper lip.’ This Mary doesn’t come with the good table manners and idealized looks of the Renaissance Virgin” (George Walzcak). Another novelist depicts Mary as friend and cousin of Barabbas, the rebellious leader of the Nazarene sect that is seeking to overthrow the Roman rulers in Palestine—the same Barabbas who is set free when before Jesus’ crucifixion, Pilate gives the throng of Jews a choice to set either Jesus or Barabbas free. These fictionalized Marys are not the equally fictionalized Marys the nuns teach about in Catholic school.

However, before she was Queen of Heaven, before she was both Mother and Virgin, before she was Our Lady of Guadalupe or Our Lady of Conyers, Georgia, or the heroine of a Feminist novel, Mary was a young girl expecting a child, and she had much to ponder. So, let us turn again to the young mother that she most certainly was.

Whether or not she knew or believed that her baby was the son of God—or as some say, “The Great I AM, Himself”—she knew that she had to take care of his every need—feed him, clothe him, teach him, kiss his boo-boos, calm his fears and correct his mistakes. I’m sure, like all expectant mothers, she compared notes with her older friends who were raising children, and got advice—solicited or otherwise—from all the grandmothers and grandfathers of the village of Nazareth.

She had to make preparations to receive this child into the world. After all, there is no indication that the swaddling clothes were delivered by one of those hovering angels! And, on top of all that, she had to make preparations to travel with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that they both could be counted in that pesky census that Emperor Augustus had ordered.

As a good Jewish mother, she knew that she would have to teach her son to observe all of the laws, rituals, customs, dos and don’ts of Judaism. And, at the very least, she would have to make sure that the food was kosher, the utensils were spotless, that the household fire was glowing, and the candles for the Hanukkah menorah were ready to be lit—and that all was in order to celebrate every other Jewish holy day.

Today's Advent candle is a candle of hope. Don't you know that Mary, like most mothers, hoped for the very best for her baby? Ten little fingers and ten little toes. Bright eyes. Healthy lungs. A strong mind. A happy disposition.

Like Mary, in this season of Advent, we wait, we expect, we ponder what has been and what will come. While bright-eyed children wait for Santa, they expect and ponder, too. They hope for bicycles and baby dolls, Nintendos and laptops, X-Boxes and Barbie dolls. They ponder what it means to be a "good girl" or a "good boy."

We grown-up children wait and expect and ponder in this season, too. We hope for an end to the unending bickering in Washington. We expect a raise. We ponder the meaning of justice for all. We pray for peace.

Now more than ever, it seems that the world needs someone like Mary's son was reported to be—a Messiah. Someone who will comfort the bereaved, heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, visit the prisoner, and welcome the stranger. Someone who will call a halt to our forward trajectory toward destruction of all the Earth's resources. Someone who will calm the storms, both natural and manufactured. Someone who will stand up to the Scribes and Pharisees of our day. Someone who will save us from ourselves.

But perhaps we should ponder just what or who we are waiting for. Are we waiting for someone else to comfort, heal, feed, clothe, visit, and welcome? Are we waiting for someone else to save the Earth? Are we waiting for someone else to calm the storms that shake us both physically and mentally? Are we waiting for someone else to stand up to Big Business, Big Banking, Big Politics, Big Brother, Big Pharmaceuticals, Big Oil, Big Religion?

Then ponder this: As Sweet Honey in the Rock sings and as Barack Obama and others have said, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

And so, let us wait. And let us ponder these things. (12)

### **Spoken Meditation**

Although in some cases Mary's image has been used to manipulate and subjugate the masses—particularly women—she has also been used to comfort and lift up the downtrodden and is seen as a gateway to God. Prayers, poems, hymns, meditations, supplications—all sorts of music—have been written to her. The choir's musical offering today is a supplication, credited to Italian composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, who in 1551 was appointed by Pope Julius III as director of the choir of the chapter of canons at St. Peter's Basilica.

"Kind Mother of the Redeemer," Palestrina wrote in his 16<sup>th</sup> Century composition, "thou who art the open door of heaven and star of the sea, help thy fallen people striving to rise again." To many, particularly women, Mary serves as a role model of the strong woman who was capable of

accomplishing great things, even miracles. Palestrina addresses her as, “[T]hou who gavest birth, while nature marveled, to thine own sacred Creator, Virgin before and afterwards.” She was merely a woman, but Palestrina notes, that she “receiv[ed] that greeting from the lips of Gabriel,” who was God’s own messenger. And he ends his prayer with this appeal: “Have mercy on sinners.” (2)