

Grace and disruption: Mary's story

December 15, 1999

Among my friends and acquaintances, the recent made-for-television movie *Mary* generated little interest. Perhaps that is because I spend too much time with Protestants for whom any display of interest in Mary continues to be slightly suspect. Or perhaps we flipped channels, remembering too well the recent adaptation of the Noah story, with its interpolation of Sodom and Gomorrah into the opening sequence--which appears to have been inspired by the battle scenes in *Braveheart*.

If NBC's *Mary* was not a disaster of floodlike proportion, it still offered a number of groaners, from the garish presentation of the beheading of John the Baptist to the lavish village homes which must have been designed by Martha Stewart.

Yet producer Eunice Shriver brought to this venture a fascinating question that saved it from being merely another bathetic bathrobe drama. She wanted to know how Mary, simply by being Jesus's mother, taught him and nurtured him and influenced his ministry. That question comes to the surface in the movie's fresh moments. Like many children, Jesus stalls at bedtime by asking his mother for a story, and the story she offers is the story of the Good Samaritan. When the adolescent Jesus dazzles the teachers in the Jerusalem temple, Joseph admits that it is Mary who has taught him Torah.

Having written a book on Mary, I am often asked about the place she occupies in my own faith, that of a Protestant by no means steeped in appreciation for Mary. As I lived long months with the stories in which Mary appears, I found them frankly terrifying, because they touched my own deepest fears about losing my child.

Acknowledging that terror is awkward, for I have no inclination to psychologize the texts. Nor do I understand Mary as a role model for mothers (or parents) only. Mary instead models Christian discipleship for all believers and gives us the words by which we may respond as she speaks her consent to God's messenger Gabriel: "Let it be with me according to your word."

Despite those convictions and qualifications, the stories exert their deepest claim upon me as a mother, and I have come to see that my reaction is not merely

personal. It is a response to the danger of the gospel itself.

Throughout Matthew's infancy narrative, danger lurks. Well before Herod's sword enters Bethlehem, Joseph decides to terminate his relationship to Mary, an action that has the power to render her both financially and socially outcast and to give her child a name quite other than "son of Joseph." Luke's soaring angel chorus stands in tension with Simeon's canticle, with its warning that "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:35). Luke's infancy narrative concludes with Mary and Joseph's frantic search for a young son whom they are unable to understand. Even in John, where no infancy narrative opens the story, the first scene in which Mary appears finds Jesus announcing the hour of his death (2:1-11).

The Shriver movie captures the element of danger in a scene that makes penetrating use of the obvious. When Mary and Joseph flee from Herod's rampage, she clutches the infant Jesus in her arms and declares, "As long as I have breath in my body, God help me, this child shall live." Admittedly, the line is banal, but countless parents swear the same oath in the face of all that threatens their children. I have had those same words in my own mouth. In Mary's mouth, they both express the utter vulnerability of all parents and painfully anticipate the crucifixion that lies ahead. She does not yet know that this child who is profoundly hers is even more profoundly not hers.

The danger that lurks in these stories extends well beyond Mary, however. In Matthew's Gospel, danger extends to Joseph and Herod, for Joseph perceives Mary's pregnancy as a threat to his honor and Herod perceives Jesus's birth as a threat to his throne. In Luke's story, danger extends even further, as the Magnificat celebrates the downfall of all who are proud, powerful and wealthy. Simeon's canticle makes it plain: Jesus is "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign that will be opposed" (2:34). The infancy narratives anticipate the coming triumph of God through the agency of Jesus, but they also offer a down payment on all the disruption the gospel brings in its wake.

Gabriel addresses Mary as one who has been graced by God, and that is the element of the story we most celebrate at this season. Yet we misunderstand this gracious act if we think of it as a gift analogous to a sweet holiday present wrapped in Hallmark paper and decorated with a silvery bow. The grace of the gospel is a frightful thing. There is no gospel without danger—even before Jesus's birth. All the carols we sing and all the candles we light cannot mask the danger the gospel poses to all the things we hold most dear, whether they are represented by Joseph's name

or Herod's throne—or Mary's baby.