



**From the Pulpit: February 11, 2024**

The Transfiguration of the Lord—Communion

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Luke 2:41–52

*Jesus' Grandmothers, V: Mary*

Here we are on the precipice of Lent and this week we will celebrate Ash Wednesday, so we are at the end of our sermon series: *Jesus' Grandmothers*. I admit I am a little jealous that I am not in fact preaching on one of Jesus' grandmothers. You will notice that today the subject of our sermon is Mary, the mother of Jesus. With hope I persevered into the story of Mary. I believe that she sheds light on Jesus' grandmothers and in turn Jesus' grandmothers tell us who God is and how God might be in our own lives.

In this story in "The Gospel of Luke" that doesn't happen in any of the other gospels, not the typical story of Mary the mother of Jesus in the nativity that we hear at Christmas time. It's not the Easter story or the crucifixion story where she stands at the foot of the cross and watches her son become a victim of violence. It is instead right in the middle of the story of Jesus' life, where he is a 12 year old boy. The story gives us an easy to enter in picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus and evokes so much about what it means to search and find Jesus in this world.

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they*

"by getting to know Jesus' grandmothers, we get to know Mary"

*found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.*

**T**his story takes little translation. A parent's panic and fear over their 12 year old son being lost for three days needs no clarification (you hear the resurrection story peeking out here, yes? three days, lost? then found?). The parental panic remains. Maybe a cell phone or a GPS tracker would have helped, but it wouldn't solve the parental problem Mary faces. To her question, *Child, why have you treated us like this?* the sassy pre-teen boy Jesus responds, "Duh, mom, I'm here and you should have known I'd be here." You can feel Jesus' eye roll, sarcastic tone, and exaggerated sigh from the distance of two millennia. Wanting your mother to be a mind reader is more perennial than expected, and apparently the Son of God is not exempt from the boundary-pushing, independence-seeking, impulsive, risk-taking behavior of a typical second semester seventh grader.

No doubt his mom's rebuke in the public circle of wise scholars would have felt embarrassing, even for the Messiah. And yet, it is just this act of reprimand and scolding that tells us so much about Mary, mother of Jesus, who is the fifth and final woman named in Jesus' genealogy (notice the dropped halo on Jesus in this absurd/hilarious rendition of Jesus being reprimanded by his mother).<sup>1</sup>

We do not get one of Jesus' grandmothers today, but somehow, they still point us in the right direction. Jesus' grandmothers—in their own day—each take bold action outside the bounds of regular patriarchal expectations, enabling God's purposes to be fulfilled, their own unusual circumstances preparing us for the

extraordinary experiences Mary will endure. Mary was barely older than Jesus is now in this scene when she gave birth to him, and so she may have only a partial vision of what it means to be a teenager. Mary's risk-taking behavior was more bold than just staying behind in Jerusalem for a few days. Mary, at a young age, said "yes" to the mystery and unfathomable uncertainty of bearing a child before marriage, let alone bearing a child that was not her future husband's. Maybe Mary *was* just as impulsive and reckless and rash as her son who stays back in Jerusalem. It makes you wonder, "Where was Mary's mother in all this? Her father? Why don't they come looking for *her* when she says "yes" to bearing God, the Incarnate One, into the world? Where is her own mother's rebuke or blessing?" The gospels are silent on these kinds of questions, and yet, somehow, the genealogy itself speaks.

Instead it is Joseph's lineage in which we hear God's story of redemption. Jesus' *paternal* grandmothers point the way. Each of them—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba—act with self-determination and personal sovereignty, independent of men, only to be known as fierce, resilient, empowered, and courageous enough to

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enable God's purposes. And thus, by getting to know Jesus' grandmothers, we get to know Mary. She too is fierce, resilient, independent, empowered, and courageous. Through her God's purposes are enabled. You hear it in her *Magnificat*, her song of justice. Through her wave after wave of God's mercy flows. Through her tyrants are knocked off their high horses, and victims are pulled up and out of the mud. Through her the starving poor sit down at a banquet and the callous rich

have their dinner invitations lost in the mail. She is bursting with good news, God-news. She is dancing with the song of God. She magnifies the Lord. But only because she says "yes" when the rest of the world wants to say "no," and when the customs and mores would suggest she is defying convention, subverting expectations,

bucking tradition, rebelling, or going against the grain.

There is a kind of poetry to this genealogy. I wouldn't have thought so before. A list of *begats*. He begat him, and he begat him, and he begat him and his brothers. But the rhythm of the genealogy, this poem that tells Jesus' story with an economy of words, the rhythm of this biographical bloodline is broken, punctured, punctuated by women who disrupt and displace the predictable pace and pulse of patriarchy placing atypical, unexpected, surprising women at the center of the story. Jesus' named grandmothers are not the matriarchs like Sarah or Hagar, Rebekah or Leah or Rachel, but instead Jesus' grandmothers named here are those in danger, those outside the patriarchal line, those beyond the social norms of their day who disrupt the orderly administration of power and privileges and thus become symbols of scandal. Our *Abuela* Tamar, and Granny Rahab, and Nana Ruth, and—how would we call her? —Bubbi Bathsheba... all... "amplify the message" we are about to hear in the gospel, that God sides with the poor and oppressed, with the outcast, the endangered, the woman and the child.<sup>2</sup>

A sermon series on Jesus' grandmothers, and yet Mary is no grandmother.

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<sup>1</sup>MAX ERNST The Virgin Chastising the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: André Breton, Paul Éluard, and the Painter, 1926. (see the sermon video: <https://subsplash.com/kenilworthunionchurch/media/mi/+htkn8rw>)

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<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture*, 2004, p. 51.

No. She is *Theotokos*. Bearer of God. *Hagia Maria*. Saint Mary. *Panagia*. Most Holy. *Purissima*. Most Pure. Our Lady of Tenderness. She Who Shows the Way. Throne of Wisdom. *Mater Dolorosa*, Mother of Sorrows. Her's is a much more direct lineage to Jesus, the only one whose DNA courses through his veins. From that long pregnant walk to Bethlehem to her place at the foot of the cross, she is a woman of deepest joy and most weighty sorrow. She is not a grandmother to Jesus, but Mary propels us back toward the grandmothers of Jesus all the while allowing their stories to speak into his family tree, showing us again Mary's place in this most holy pedigree.

I wouldn't have thought the genealogy was a poem. I wouldn't have known. It's all too invisible. But Wallace Stevens says that "the poet is priest of the invisible,"<sup>3</sup> It is the very hiddenness of these stories, deep within the wells and aquifers of our spiritual ancestry, that allow the poetic to emerge. Edgar Lee Masters puts it just one octave higher, saying "a poem comes out of the vibrations of the soul."<sup>4</sup> The grandmothers of Jesus offer a kind of divine reverberation through which we can sense the turning of the spirit in our own lives.

The grandmothers of Jesus break the rhythm of his ancestry, admitting that, yes, he is part of the long line from Abraham to David to the Exile and return, but that there in the midst of those normative stories is the poetry of an even more unexpected and impossible redemption, and so for us in the depth of our own impossibilities, there is, there must be a way through.

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If the genealogy of Jesus is a poem, it is because the grandmothers of Jesus break the rhythm of his ancestry and point us to the place where heartache and impossibility lead to divine blessing, but only because of the "brave and bold decisions" of the grandmothers who in perilous situations, act to advance the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

Naomi Shihab Nye was born in St. Louis County, Missouri, the city of Ferguson in fact. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and her mother an American of German and Swiss descent, and Nye spent her adolescence in both Jerusalem and the U.S. Her paternal Palestinian grandmother was displaced by war in 1948 when Israel became a state, and that caused her father to move to the states. In a poem of heartache, suffering, and the ordinary life of her grandmother, Naomi Shihab Nye describes what it

was like to feel her grandmother's hands on her forehead during illness, or watch her grandmother bake bread, or listen as her grandmother waits for news that does not come or reads between the lines when word does come. Nye writes with wisdom from the perspective of her own grandmother saying, "Answer, if you hear the words under the words –/otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges, /difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones."<sup>6</sup>

Rough edges. The grandmothers of Jesus too, and his own mother live in a world with a lot of rough edges. A world that is difficult to get through. But somehow with eyes open to the poetry of his genealogy, we can hear the words under the words, and become participants in the reverberations of God's presence seen in renewal, rebirth, restoration, recovery, reversal, and redemption.

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<sup>3</sup>Stevens, Wallace. *Adagia*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

<sup>4</sup>Masters, Edgar Lee. "What is Poetry?" *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, September 1915

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<sup>5</sup>Phyllis Trible. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. 1978, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup>Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Words Under the Words*. The Eighth Mountain Press, 1995.

Audre Lorde says that poetry “lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ genealogy points us there too, a future of change in which the God-bearers, the unconventional, irregular, disruptive ancestors point us to our own interruptions, our own disruption, our own redeeming work, so that we too might become ourselves God-bearers in this rough-edged kind of world.

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<sup>7</sup>Lorde, Audre. *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

## —The Great Prayer—

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

*This prayer was adapted from The Reverend Christine Jerrett, United Church of Canada*

We worship you, God, with songs of praise,  
with earnest prayers,  
and with ears that listen for you to speak your saving  
truth into our lives.

We worship you in the silent spaces where we struggle  
for hope and for courage.

We pray for the people of Gaza,  
forced into ever more claustrophobic spaces and  
surrounded by explosions and gunfire.  
We pray for the people of Ukraine, still caught up in a  
lingering war of unrighteous aggression.

Refashion the stony hearts of hostile leaders who  
cannot find value in neighbors who speak a different  
language or compete for an envied geography.  
If any here are hobbled by chronic illness,  
or overwhelmed by fearful diagnosis,  
or limp with brittle bones,  
grant them your healing grace and shrink their anxieties.

We long for a glimpse of your glory:  
the glory that shines in the darkness,  
the glory that touches lives with a beauty so holy  
that it heals the wounded soul;  
the glory that gives strength to the weary.

We, who stumble and fall so often,  
long for your light to shine upon us.

Then, grant us grace  
to live every moment  
changed by such glory—  
daring to live with hope and courage and love  
reflecting the life of Jesus,  
through whom your glory shines  
in the most unexpected ways.

Now we celebrate the feast of our redemption,  
and proclaim the death of Jesus,  
and announce his resurrection until he comes in glory.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all glory and honor are yours,  
almighty Father, forever and ever.

In the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our  
Father... Amen.

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