

**Sermon for August 15, 2019**  
**The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Today, on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we can pause and look deep within our belief systems to ask what exactly the Assumption of Mary means to us and in a broader sense, what Mary, the mother of God, means to us.

I think I've shared with some of you that when I was growing up in the Southern Baptist Church, we didn't have Mary. The only time she was ever mentioned was maybe as a brief half-sentence in a Christmas sermon. Otherwise, there was no Mary. We didn't hear sermons about Mary's life, we did not hear scriptures concerning her read aloud in church, and we saw no images of her except as a silent bystander in Nativity scenes.

The Baptist faith began in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century as a rejection of the Anglican Church, and it followed in the path of the Puritans and the English Separatists to purge the church of what is considered to be popish, Roman, pagan worship. The position of the Baptists was and is today, the Protestant belief that Marian devotion is idolatry, akin to worshipping female fertility goddesses such as the Ancient Near Eastern *Astartē* - the Queen of Heaven – mentioned in Jeremiah chapter 7.

But none of that fervent Baptist admonition and supposed proof-texting against idol worship could prevent me, as a child and then later as a teenager, from having a burning curiosity, and longing, for Mary. There was one Roman Catholic church in my hometown of 60,000 people. It was attended by displaced northerners who had suffered the unfortunate circumstance of having

to move to Georgia due to their job or other family commitments, and also by immigrants from foreign countries who had brought their faith with them. The name of the church was St. Mary's, and I was fascinated by it and by the parochial school attached to it, St. Mary's School, which was run by nuns from the Daughters of Charity, based in Emmitsburg, Maryland. During high school, I would sneak away from my family and my friends and I would chaperone dances and field trips with my friend Warren, whose nieces attended that school. I met exotic Roman Catholics who had siblings named Mary Beth, Mary Angela, Mary Catherine...and I was astonished that everyone there could openly look at statues and even wear jewelry bearing the image of Mary without being told that they would be cast into the lake of unquenchable fire.

Devotion to Mary was not practiced in the low churches I attended when I first converted to the Episcopal faith, but it was one of the many things which drew me into the religious life when I discovered that Marian feasts were celebrated in convents and monasteries, in keeping with the Anglo-Catholic movement in which our communities were born, and whose traditions we try to lovingly preserve and uphold.

Our keeping of the Marian feasts says something about who we believe Mary to be, and it says something about her place in the story of Jesus. As Anglo-Catholics, we see Mary as a prominent figure in our church year – an active and vocal participant in the Gospel story. She is not a mere idol, without voice and substance. She is a living, breathing part of our faith – a comfort and intercessor for us in times of fear and anguish.

The Assumption of Mary was not accepted as official dogma by the Catholic church until 1950, and this particular feast was not included in our Prayer Book until 1979, but it has been observed by Christians on August 15 since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. It has not been easy for the Protestant-leaning branch of the Anglican church to accept this particular feast because to do so involves the acceptance of the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary was conceived full of grace, without original sin, and that because of this her body did not have to suffer the consequence of corruption in the grave. Theologians differ over whether she died first or was just taken up to heaven without having to die, but most say that she died in solidarity with her son who was made to undergo the human experience of death, and then she was taken up to heaven, body and soul.

The idea that Mary was assumed into heaven by God, as were Elijah and Enoch, puts her at the highest level of disciples, and you can probably understand how controversial that placement would be in the rigidly patriarchal system of the church and in the southern culture in which I was raised, where women are to be subservient to men, to be seen and not heard.

The Feast of the Assumption was first celebrated in England in 1060, but by 1561 it had disappeared from the church calendar due to Anglican reformers who saw it as exalting Mary to a level above Christ. In spite of this omission, theologians throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries carried the Marian feasts onward and handed them down to the liturgical renewals of our present generation. In 2005, a joint statement between Anglican and the Roman Catholic theologians called *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* was released which sought to reconcile Protestants to the Catholic devotion to Mary.

Serving at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin gave me a greater appreciation for Mary - this young girl, who bore the incarnation of God and humbly accepted God's will for her life. There's a LOT of Mary at Saint Mary's. Two chapels are dedicated to her, and there are many, many statues and images of her all around the church. The Angelus is prayed by clergy and worshippers at morning, noonday and evening prayer every day. The feasts of Mary are all observed during the year, and I can attest to the fact that her loving, protective and calming presence provides a quiet sanctuary for thousands of people in the busy, anxious heart of New York City.

There have been many moments in my life where I have been afraid, and I have prayed the Rosary, and my fears have subsided. Devotion to Mary has that effect. In her Assumption to heaven, she can teach us not to fear death, and in the example of her life, she can teach us to follow God with faith and courage.

