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"Pondering All These Things"

Mary and Motherhood

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One Advent season several years ago, eight-plus months pregnant, I looked upon a crèche scene of kings, shepherds, and Joseph and felt acutely Mary's Protestant isolation.[1] She literally faded away into the shadows hidden behind a bunch of men, including God incarnate. This pictorial memory partly captures women's position in the Protestant church: male clergy and God representations subsume Mary's role as mother and as a mediator of God.[2]

For many Protestants—and not just hypersensitive feminist mothers—Mary is almost completely invisible. She seldom appears pietistically in popular practices or liturgically in prayers or hymns. Artistic representations of the Madonna and child in stained glass or sculpture are rarer still. Mary stars briefly in annual Christmas pageants, if encountered at all, and gets occasional mention in Mother's Day sermons. But even these exceptions reflect Protestant ambivalence. This uncertainty about Mary is not unrelated to ambivalence about women and motherhood in general.

In this essay, I speak out of this silence by asking how a reconstructed Mary might better inform Protestant understandings of mothering. By "reconstructed" I mean a consideration of Mary from the perspective of feminist maternal Protestant theology. I will ask not only how reflection on Mary might influence motherhood but also how contemporary experiences of mothering might shape perceptions of Mary. These questions lead to an examination of two areas: the dynamics of Mary's Protestant disappearance and the implications of her reappearance. How has Mary informed Protestant understandings of motherhood? And what might a reconstructed Mary tell us?[3]

I will argue that abstinence from Mary in Protestantism went hand in hand with and even propped up the idealization of modern motherhood. I will

suggest, in turn, that a Protestant revitalization of the centrality of Mary might help foster a more realistic view of motherhood. Fresh interpretation of her own concealment in scripture—her "pondering"—suggests that Mary herself weighed the complexities of mothering. How much more, then, might contemporary mothers rest easy with their own struggles?

RECONSTRUCTING MARY

As philosopher Sara Ruddick observes, "[T]he passions of maternity are so sudden, intense, and confusing that we often remain ignorant of the perspective, the *thought* that has developed from mothering. Lacking pride, we have failed to deepen or articulate that thought."[4] "We know very little about the inner discourse of a mother," agrees literary theorist Susan Rubin Suleiman. "Mothers don't write, they are written." Yet, as long as we focus on "the-mother-as-she-is-written rather than on the-mother-as-she-writes [and thinks] we shall continue in our ignorance."[5]

Ignorance about the-mother-as-she-writes particularly plagues theology. Until recently, the reflective discipline of mothers has not been seen as a valid source of theological knowledge. While scholars in psychology, political science, literature, and other fields have begun to speak out of the experience of mothering, theologians have often remained wary.

With Mary, the silence around maternal thinking is compounded. And with Protestantism's evasion of Mary and mothers, the theological void is further deepened. We do not think of Mary as a maternal subject with religious or theological knowledge. And we do not think of using maternal wisdom as a way to understand Mary's theologizing. It's no wonder that when I went to work on this essay, my mind repeatedly went blank.

Ruddick's understanding of "maternal thinking" paves the way for fresh theological reflection on Mary. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas, Ruddick defines maternal thinking as a discipline that arises out of the social practice of mothering. This discipline involves the intellectual capacities, judgments, metaphysical attitudes, and values that are evoked, developed, and affirmed in the midst of mothering. In response to the "historical reality of a biological child in a particular social world," the mother "asks certain questions rather than others; she establishes criteria for the truth, adequacy, and relevance of proposed answers; and she cares about the findings she makes and can act on." In essence, she develops a "conceptual scheme" or "vocabulary and logic of connections" that orders and expresses the practice.[6]

A feminist maternal theology on Mary, therefore, draws on knowledge located within the practices of mothering. Maternal thinking has already

shaped pivotal insights in feminist theology. When Valerie Saiving first put forth the revolutionary idea that women's sinfulness might not lie so much in pride and self-assertion as in self-loss and denigration, she drew heavily on her own experience of raising a young daughter in the midst of graduate study.[7] Other equally provocative challenges to Christian conceptions of the sacrificial meaning of the atonement, love as self-sacrifice, sexual ethics, and Christian vocation have evolved as a result of maternal thinking.[8]

Feminist maternal theology extends four core premises of feminist theology in new directions. The demand to give privileged voice to the marginalized is extended to mothers and children. Feminist maternal theology further challenges the demonization and idealization of women's bodies in the acts of bearing and raising children. It enriches debates about theological doctrines of love and sin by turning to the complex questions of love and sin between the unequal parties of adult and child. Finally, a feminist maternal theology stretches claims for justice and liberation to include children and mothers, for whom equality based on sameness with the adult male simply does not work. To think about Mary's motherhood from this perspective, therefore, means extending feminist theological convictions in a new direction.

Such imaginative theological speculation is not without historical precedent. Over the past two millennia, religious ideas about Mary have involved grand postulations on the part of the church and its mostly male theologians. Scriptural references to Mary are few in number (the Gospel of Luke makes the most mention, identifying her by name twelve times). But the legends and bibliographical citations are immense, with over two thousand books written about Mary in the twentieth century alone.[9] She is, in Shari Thurer's words, the ideal "blank screen, a perfect canvas for our projections."[10]

Mary's appeal as a blank screen is heightened, I believe, by the very fact that she is a mother. Pelikan wonders why she has retained such a "hold" on the Western psyche. His answer—that she has been "'first in the hearts'" of devoted religious practitioners, especially women—begs the question.[11] He never mentions the hold mothers have over their children, for good and for ill, and hence the hold Mary has over religious ideation. Speculation about Mary rests solidly on a whole host of conscious thoughts and unconscious longings. She gathers up all the free-floating desires that mothers evoke.

So a Protestant renaissance of thought is not out of order within this broader pattern of theological innovation. Maternal thinking about Mary is, however, relatively new. A Protestant feminist maternal reconsideration of Mary as mother allows for iconoclasm and reformation of another sort. Perhaps it is time that Protestants, who generally do not think all that much about Jesus even having a mother, also find inspiration, consolation, and liberation in Mary as mother.

THE DYNAMICS AND IMPACT OF MARY'S PROTESTANT DISAPPEARANCE

Protestant feminist exploration of Mary's motherhood immediately encounters two doctrinal and practical suspicions: the Protestant rejection of Mary as intercessor and religious icon and the feminist rejection of Mary as a symbol of "ultimate womanhood" and perfect motherhood. These theological misgivings deserve both respect and reconsideration. In order to reconstruct Mary as mother, two movements are needed. We need to understand the Protestant suspicion and glean from it the best insights while leaving behind the worst. Likewise, we need to understand and move through the feminist resistance to Mary and romanticized, subservient motherhood.

Protestant Apprehensions

Beverly Gaventa puts it bluntly: "[I]f there is one thing Protestants agree on—across the theological spectrum . . .—it is that *we* do not talk about Mary." She describes the reluctance she experienced first-hand when her offers to speak on Mary in a variety of settings elicited the following response: "'Oh. I don't think that would attract a very large audience. We're mostly Protestants here.'"[12] Even recent fascination with other biblical and saintly women throughout history has not sparked similar interest in Mary.

What is this Protestant apprehension all about, and what might be some of its inadvertent consequences? Rosemary Radford Ruether identifies three aspects of Protestant thought that fed the decrease in Marian devotion: the Reformation idea of the Bible as fundamental source of God's Word; the radical definition of justification by faith alone; and the exaltation of Christian marriage and rejection of the sanctity of virginity.[13] Pelikan also notes the first two factors. Protestant Reformers used slogans of *solus Christus* and *sola Scriptura* to attack the "entire chain of mediating powers—the sacraments, the church, the saints" and ultimately, Mary.[14] There was simply no biblical basis for the proliferation of stories about Mary. And no saint, even the Mother of God, mediated grace.

Ruether, however, is attentive to an additional factor of particular relevance here: the abolition of monasticism, which had multiple consequences. Hand in hand with the demise of monastic life went a drastic change in the status of celibacy and virginity. Chastity no longer promised a closer walk with God. Instead, the Reformers named marriage and parenthood valid religious vocations. Luther himself extolled the married state and declared God's smile evident in the meanest of child-rearing tasks when done in faith.[15] These

affirmations drained the impulse behind religious beliefs, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Perpetual Virginity of Mary. Procreation and sex did not defile women. Nor did abstinence from sex make Mary special. Mary and Joseph became just another "normal married couple."[16]

Yet, while the exaltation of the virgin ideal had its problems, so did the glorification of marriage and motherhood. Although motherhood was recognized as a religious vocation, women's subservience was all the more strictly enforced. Moreover, motherhood became the only legitimate calling for women. Through vows of celibacy, medieval women had avenues of relative freedom and power and were able to pursue scholarship, retain property, and live in community with other women. To be sure, the Reformation elevated the family's status and gave women roles as religious companions of their husbands. But it also confined them more strictly to their households, under the authority of husbands, ministers, and magistrates.[17]

Protestants no longer exalted Mary. They elevated instead the virtuosity of submissive wives and selflessly loving mothers. With the diminishment of Mary's role came the embellishment, idealization, and domestic confinement of mothers—the angel "in the home"[18]—and the idolization of God the Father. Fathers, husbands, and clergy, in turn, assumed the role of mediating God's word in relationship to women, wives, and children.

This is not a wholly fair portrayal of Reformation theology. Ruether herself, in some of her swift generalizations about Protestant subordination of women, waxes less than generous. Pelikan rightly observes, "It would be a mistake, and one into which many interpretations of the Reformation both friendly and hostile have all too easily fallen, to emphasize these negative and polemical aspects of its Mariology at the expense of the positive place the Protestant Reformers assigned to her in their theology."[19] The Reformation slogan that best epitomized Protestant views of Mary was *sola fide*. While Mary no longer served as an intercessor, she could act as a model of faith. Mary heard the Word and responded, matching her faith in the great drama of salvation, Luther notes, to that of Abraham himself.[20]

Nevertheless, holding up Mary as a model of faith became increasingly difficult as corresponding creed and ritual diminished. So, while some Reformers, such as Zwingli, continued to teach the "right kind of Marian piety" and none of the Reformers denied Mariology entirely, those more anxious about eradicating papist expressions of Marian devotion, such as Calvin, won the day.[21] Feasts of Mary vanished, use of holy pictures were banned, and Protestant churches, with the exception of the Anglican Church, gradually lost interest in her. As a well-socialized Protestant today, when I searched for models of faith in motherhood, I simply never considered Mary.

Feminist Apprehensions

The feminist movement is also partly responsible for the growing neglect of Mary. By and large, feminists question the Christian portrayal of the Virgin Mary as a holdover from patriarchy. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, asserts that the "Mary myth" has its "roots and development in a male, clerical, and ascetic culture and theology" and "serves to deter women from becoming fully independent and whole human persons."[22] Ruether argues that the "Mariological tradition functions in patriarchal theology primarily to reflect and express the ideology of the patriarchal feminine."[23]

What are the chief complaints that support such feminist opposition? In an essay on Mariology and feminism (an addition not often found in most feminist theological anthologies, by the way), Sarah Coakley uses a fairly standard division of feminism—liberal, radical, socialist, and postmodern—as a way to group distinct concerns about Mary. While the liberal emphasis on equal opportunity does not "readily combine with Mariological themes," more reflection on Mary appears, not surprisingly, in the radical feminist reclamation of female biology and motherhood. Both approaches, however, tend to criticize more than reconstruct. Liberal feminists worry about the ways in which Mary personifies the obedient female kneeling subserviently before Christ. Radical feminists see Mary as "an impossible ideal as Virgin *and* mother, and thus a crushing exemplar for real mothers."[24] Doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, aimed at transcending the entrapment of sex and death, hold up a narrow ideal. They perpetuate a dualistic perception of women as either death-wielding temptresses and sources of sin or disembodied, sexless divinities. Mary Daly is the most scathingly outraged. She casts Mary as a rape victim and sees traditional Mariology as a projection of "*male* femininity." In the 1950s, as women were "badgered into housewifery," it was "no coincidence" that the Assumption became official Catholic doctrine. As women went "down," Mary went "up."[25]

On occasion, however, legitimate concerns about Mary as a beacon of true womanhood turn into thoughtless rhetoric. For example, in her *Report on the Family*, Shere Hite makes sweeping assumptions about the "icons of Jesus, Mary and Joseph." On the first page she blames family crises on the sorry attempt to imitate the "holy family." The church "has as its basic principle, at its heart, the political will of men to dominate women."[26] Beyond this unquestioned assumption and the use of religious imagery as a straw horse, Christianity receives little further attention. She simply ignores the plurality of Christian traditions and, equally disturbing, the existence of feminist theologians.

Yet in their concern about matricide and advocacy for female god imagery, feminist theologians themselves have not paid enough attention to Mary. Sel-

dom have they considered the Protestant annihilation of Mary or explored a reconstructed Mary as a partial solution to these issues. In *Remembering Esperanza*, for example, Mark Kline Taylor identifies matriphobia and matricide as the operative dynamics behind sexism. He advocates a cultural-political theology that grants *"a privilege for those excluded or absent from the conversation."*[27] Yet his constructive response turns neither to women's experience, except in a remote way through his memory of Esperanza, nor to Mary's experience. Instead, he proposes Christ as mother—*Christus mater*— arguing that "to take seriously the Christ in our time is to take seriously the mother."[28] Taking Mary's motherhood seriously is never entertained as a means to revalue maternal theological powers or combat sexism.

Likewise, Catherine Keller mounts a scathing, insightful exposition of the development of matricidal myths, psychologies, theologies, and philosophies over the centuries of Western civilization. Fearful of maternal power, Greek myth and biblical creation stories turn their fury on the mother. The "covert slaughter of the mother is this culture's bond of reenactment."[29] Yet her work also avoids any discussion of Mary's Protestant matricide or Mary's resurrection as part of revisioning divine incarnation.

In these and other works, Protestant feminist theologians do recognize the need for women to know themselves as representatives of God and, equally important, for men to have the "chastening experience of being unlike the Goddess." Barbara Andolsen sees such a theological move as absolutely necessary to grounding her view of Christian love as mutuality. But she remains dubious. It is, she argues, "questionable whether any religion which unself-consciously incorporates a female aspect of the deity would remain Christianity." Despite efforts to reinterpret the Trinity in more inclusive terms, "it will be extraordinarily difficult for Christianity to embody in its symbols a belief that women are full human beings and hence are equally capable of serving as symbols of divine power."[30]

Feminist theology, however, is not without rich resources on Mary. Daniel Migliore includes feminist and liberation theologies alongside collaboration in biblical studies as one of the "two most important developments" since Vatican II.[31] It is particularly unfortunate that Pelikan's 1996 historical survey fails to include any commentary on feminist theology's contributions, beyond the briefest reference. He completely misses what Coakley describes as a "wide range of Mariological options . . . already at least fragmentarily in play" in feminist theology.[32]

In liberal feminism, Ruether, for example, sees Mary as an exemplar of autonomy, choice, and empowerment. "Luke goes out of his way," she says, "to stress that Mary's motherhood is a free choice," made without consultation with Joseph.[33] Here Mary's motherhood is not her exclusive self-definition.

Her vocational obligations extend to her role as witness and cocreator. Others have taken up this approach, even if not under the explicit auspices of feminism. Patrick Miller, for example, identifies Mary as Christianity's "first theologian" who offers "the first christological reflection" of the church, musing about what Jesus would become and about what would become of him.[34] As Gaventa notes, in Luke's Gospel Mary assumes three interconnected roles of disciple, prophet, and mother, and ignoring any of them "flatten[s] Mary's character and reduce[s] her to a single feature or one function."[35]

Socialist and postmodern feminists venture still further. In a different mode, Ruether and, more recently, Brazilians Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer proclaim Mary "mother of the poor," liberating the economically and politically oppressed.[36] And postmodern feminists, such as Julia Kristeva, have taken particular interest in Mary as part of their claim that it is motherhood, more than womanhood, that is repressed in patriarchal society. "Wholesale rejection of Marian mythology by mainstream feminism leaves a gap" that needs to be filled. Motherhood needs fresh discourse and symbols that will correct distorted perceptions of the maternal "other."[37]

In *Because of Her Testimony*, British feminist theologian Anne Thurston argues that the sanitized, desexualized ideal of the Virgin Mary falsely represents women's maternal experience. The "sanitizing of the birth of Jesus—removing all physical and sexual connotations—has closed off whole areas of possible theological reflection."[38] Time could hardly be riper for reconsideration of Mary as mother, both to enrich the Christian tradition and to empower women as mothers.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF MARY'S PROTESTANT REAPPEARANCE: PONDERINGS

If Mary's erasure went hand in hand with the idealization of modern motherhood, a revitalization of Mary's theological importance might foster a richer view of motherhood. Even in a postmodern context of ambiguity and pluralism, people need ideals by which to live. Children and adults alike seek ideals as a means to soothe, comfort, and sustain the self. People will worship gods; the important question is what kind.[39]

The religious figure of Mary as mother is not an altogether bad place to project hopes and dreams. It is certainly an improvement over popular fascination with questionable public figures, like Madonna and Princess Diana, and over projecting on ourselves or on our own mothers the domesticated virtues of modern motherhood, especially if religious ideals remain open to critique and reform. A fuller grasp of Mary as a maternal example opens up space for a more generous understanding of the plight of contemporary mothers.

Lacking postbiblical traditions and church teachings on Mary, Protestants are left with Scripture. As Gaventa observes, "[I]f Protestants are going to talk about Mary . . . we must begin in a Protestant-like way. That is to say, we must *begin* with scripture."[40] Similarly, lacking nonpatriarchal traditions about Mary, feminists are left with human and maternal experience. If feminist theologians are going to provide fresh insight on Mary, they must begin in a feminist-like way—with experience. What then might we learn about mothering in Scripture and experience from Mary as mother?

Mary's Ponderings

Compared to the lore surrounding Mary over the centuries, the Scripture references are few. And the passages on Mary's "pondering" hide as much as they disclose. More has been said on her words, the Magnificat, than her musings. Nonetheless, fresh insights can be gleaned from Luke's portrayal of Mary in the second chapter.

Mary's "pondering" appears in two passages, first as a part of the birth narrative (Luke 2:19) and later after the twelve-year old Jesus stays behind in the temple (Luke 2:51b). The shepherds tell Mary that angelic hosts announced her child as the Savior, the Christ, and amid the wonder of others, she "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (RSV). And later, upon returning to Nazareth to watch an "obedient" son grow in "wisdom and in stature" after his three-day disappearance, Mary "kept all these things in her heart" (RSV).

I never paid much attention to these passages until I became a mother myself. With children in tow, the words, Mary "kept all these things in her heart" literally jumped off the page. Long before this book's editors invited me to write about Mary's motherhood, I had underlined these two passages. And when I flipped through my book *Also a Mother* in search of inspiration, there on the first page, staring me in the face, was the word "ponder." The book basically "ponders" the dilemmas of mothering. It especially ponders the virtues of the good mother/good worker, tested regularly in the fire of trivial yet revelatory moments of child care.

Why this maternal attraction to and even unconscious adoption of Mary's own pondering? As a mother, perhaps I felt able to identify with Mary—albeit partially and in a carefully contained Protestant feminist way. I doubt that I would have recognized, much less admitted, this indulgence without the pressure to write on the subject. Frankly, I have been in awe of Mary's pondering for a long time. I have, so to speak, wanted this conversation with her. I have wished, as I think many in Catholicism also desired, that she could talk back. I have wondered if Mary's experience as mother even remotely resembles my own.

The author of Luke deserves credit for the brevity of his portrayal of Mary's thought. In these two instances, he does not put words into her mouth. He

thereby avoids turning her into "the-mother-as-she-is-written" and retains something of the mother as she speaks. He uses similar phrasing earlier in characterizing Mary's response to her angelic visitation, where Mary pondered or "considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29b, RSV). One can almost imagine his constraint as he searched for the right way to keep her dignity as speaking subject intact.

Other equally compelling readings, of course, have been given. Biblical scholar Jane Schaberg sees Luke's restraint here as simply another instance of his view of women as "models of subordinate service, excluded from the power center of the movement."[41] Mary is speechless, she argues, because that is her proper role as dependent "listener," pondering what is not understood in "silence."

Silence, narrowly defined as muteness or speechlessness, does not do justice to the intent of Luke's words.[42] Calling this "silence" is to cast her pondering, as Gaventa remarks, "in sentimental and trivializing terms." If the gospels had depicted John the Baptist or Peter pondering over Jesus, the "church would long ago have dubbed these as moments of theological reflection."[43] Maybe it is time to consider them thus.

While a strand of passive, ingratiating submission can certainly be deduced from these texts, we can also untangle other threads. Certainly, as Schaberg herself points out, in chapter 1 women play more powerful roles than in the rest of the Gospel, with speeches by Elizabeth and Mary that go unadulterated by men.[44] Schaberg's simplistic interpretation of Mary's role in chapter 2 as mere listener seems limited by comparison. Others, such as Miller, join Schaberg in mistakenly naming Mary's musing as simply "silence."

Seen in a more positive light, perhaps pondering was Luke's version of what Ruddick calls "maternal thinking." Ruddick identifies three interests around which the practice of maternal thinking evolves: the desire for the preservation, the growth, and the acceptability of the child.[45] Such interests cross over differences of class and race, even though they take different shape in other contexts. They also, undoubtedly, shaped Mary's pondering. Ironically, when Ruddick spells out the capacities and virtues that mothers develop in pursuit of these interests, such as "humility" and "attention," we actually hear echoes of Mariology. "Whilst owning nothing conscious to Mariological traditions," Coakley observes, Ruddick's tough-minded philosophical analysis of parenting "nonetheless returns to central Marian themes."[46] Ruddick provides, however, a reworking of these virtues from the mother's internal frame of reference.

The dictionary offers several definitions for "ponder": to weigh in the mind, to deliberate about, to muse over, or to think or consider, especially quietly, soberly, and deeply. It offers a list of synonyms: meditate, ruminate, and muse.

Pondering is prolonged consideration. It is often inconclusive. Meditate implies a focusing of one's attention to understand more deeply. As one author notes, the very tone of the word "ponder"—its "heavy, slow sound"—"reinforces the idea of introspection." The word "lacks the implied resolution of words like 'assess' or 'analyze.'"[47] The sonorous effect of the word is magnified by its location in the "heart" rather than in the mind. This location does not negate thinking, as in the conventional opposition between the thinking mind and feeling heart, but rather deepens the wisdom found within and through one's passions. Keeping thoughts in one's heart means keeping them at the center or core of one's being. Finally, "ponder" involves a certain acceptance of realities that go beyond our understanding. At such a point, the only response is appreciation and perhaps amazement. This play on the text's vocabulary hints at three aspects of mothering that deserve elaboration as powerful activities of mothering implied by Luke's words: attention, anguish, and amazement.

Attention

To describe the capacity of attention and the coinciding virtue of love, Ruddick turns to Simone Weil. As a Christian theologian, Weil actually sees the realization of attention as a "miracle" rather than a "discipline."[48] One cannot command attention by sheer will power or muscular concentration. It evolves out of the mere joy of the work. Attention requires a kind of patient, anticipatory "waiting upon truth," a holding openness. Prayer itself consists of attention.

Human activities can nonetheless hone our attention. Weil points to school studies, but the practice of mothering serves as well. "Every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth," she says, "he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit."[49]

Most fundamentally, Weil sees attention as a way of looking that asks genuinely of the other, "What are you going through?"[50] The ordinary mother, then, who comes to ask, "What are you going through?" without rushing to give the answer, embodies maternal attention. For Ruddick, maternal attention means regarding children as fully real, without seizing or using them. Elsewhere she talks about an attitude of "holding" governed by the "priority of keeping over acquiring, of conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child's life."[51]

In her attentive pondering, Mary models a certain kind of Christian spirituality of presence, what I have attempted to describe elsewhere as "contemplation in the midst of chaos."[52] Contemplation is not simply something monks do in solitary settings. Mary attends to God precisely within the confused,

messiness of her life. She prays in the midst of tensions and questions, fixing her attention so that she might see things otherwise hidden and make God's purpose manifest in the daily toil. Mary, then, "is not the one to whom we pray," as Migliore recognizes, but the one *with* whom we pray, as a sister in Christ and God's mother, unceasingly, in the midst of our work and loves.[53]

There is much about mothering that makes attentive love challenging—the "intensity of identification, . . . the daily wear of maternal work, . . . indignities of an indifferent social order, and the clamor of children themselves."[54] Ruddick believes it requires effort and self-discipline; Weil sees it as a gift. In either case, the attentive focus of the Lukan Mary offers some sort of vision or sign of hope and guidance as mothers respond every day to some of the many temptations that Ruddick enumerates—"indifference, passivity, . . . anxious or inquisitorial scrutiny, domination, intrusiveness, caprice, and self-protective cheerfulness."[55]

Anguish

One of the hazards that Ruddick does not explicitly mention but that is present in the Lukan text, read from the end of the story backwards, is maternal anguish. Mothering involves loss. It demands a constant giving up and letting go. From the moment of conception, a woman physically experiences a life that is both herself and not herself. Art historian Anne Higonnet captures some of the sentiment well:

> There is, arguably, no identification at once more intense and more vexed than the identification a parent feels with her or his child, perhaps especially so in the case of the mother, whose child begins biologically as a part of herself, and whom she feeds as an infant with her own body. If, moreover, . . . identification reacts defensively against loss, then again, identification would be a crucial issue for parents, who must inevitably begin losing their children as soon as they are born.[56]

Fearfulness and excessive control naturally tempt mothers. To stem these temptations, mothers must learn to sit easy with a certain amount of anguish.

When Mary ponders, she meets up with her own anguish. From the beginning, as Gaventa notes, Mary lingers over and contends with a son that is "profoundly hers and yet not hers at all."[57] In the second passage, observes Migliore, this tension spawns confusion, anxiety, and doubts when Jesus does not follow his parents, tempting Mary to strive to contain Jesus' mission.[58] A mother can even "experience her children's own liveliness," notes Ruddick, as an "enemy of the life she is preserving."[59]

Mary's distress runs deeper still because of the distinctiveness of Jesus' "liveliness" and the impossibility of maternal preservation. The author of Luke knows the end of the story as he tells the beginning, and hence he ties Mary's

pondering to her deeper intuition about Jesus' mission. Not insignificantly, he places the story of Simeon's oracle between the two pondering passages, reminding readers of the suffering to come. Simeon warns Mary, "[T]his child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34–35). Here, Luke names the pain that the death of Jesus will cause her.[60]

Many mothers experience what psychologists have described as "disenfranchised grief," grief over loss that is denied social and religious legitimacy.[61] Unfortunately, interpretations of Mary as the perfect example of self-sacrificial love conceal her real distress. Calvin himself corrects views of Mary's interrogation of Jesus for his twelve-year-old thoughtlessness ("[W]hy have you treated us like this?"—Luke 2:48a) as a case of selfish pride. She was "pushed not by pride," he observes, "but by *three days* of sorrow."[62] Interpreting Mary's remark as self-serving puts her, and, in turn, all mothers who appear insufficiently self-effacing into the position of disenfranchised griever who must do grief work in secret without social support.

Mary's response to Jesus in the temple discourages such a reading. As Gaventa discerns, the NRSV—"[Y]our father and I have been searching for you *in great anxiety*"—fails to "capture the poignancy of the word Luke selects (*odynoun*)." A better translation of verse 48b is "Behold, your father and I have been looking for you *in anguish*." The emotional claim that Mary makes here "is the real and present terror of parents who do not know where their child is."[63]

Contemporary society has a rather truncated, hackneyed phrase for parental anguish—the "empty nest syndrome." This oft-used term confines loss to the final stage of a child's official departure and is oblivious to the infinitesimal leave-takings that occur daily and at each life stage, including the terror at moments when our children vanish from sight without warning. Society unfortunately renders maternal anguish a "syndrome" or abnormal affliction that one ought to get over rather than recognizing it as an inherent and ongoing part of all parenting, as these passages imply.

Awe

Ultimately, awe is intrinsic to parenting. The attention and anguish of Mary's pondering also contains a certain amount of awe—sheer amazement about what she sees and hears. Mary's pondering in Luke 2:19 is sandwiched between two exclamations of wonder at Jesus. In Luke 2:51, her meditation follows the amazement of the teachers in the temple at Jesus' answers. While Gaventa stresses the contrast between the verbal cries of marvel and Mary's stillness, I cannot help but see contagion.[64] How could Mary not join in praise as she has already done in her testimony to Elizabeth?

Here Mary seems even more as Miller describes: "one whose maternal response outran those of any other mother while also being like those of any mother."[65] If I attend well to my three sons, daily I am astonished and dazed—by spontaneous humorous comments, by their sheer persistence in the face of daunting challenges, by shoes larger or shoulders taller than mine, or by small acts of gratitude and love returned to me unasked for and unexpected. Simplistically put, I am amazed by their growth. How much more then was Mary dazzled by the grace of God within her own life—touching her skin, changing her life—that words themselves could not suffice? The passage on Jesus in the temple points to this fact by placing as bookends, at the beginning and end, testimony that Jesus grew in wisdom and in favor before God. The translation that Mary "*treasured* all these things" in the NRSV rather than "*kept* all these things in her heart" in the RSV points more directly to the sureness of Mary's wonder.

Without romanticizing either pregnancy or delivery, there is much about bearing the gift of new life, from quickening to the travail of labor to birth, that goes beyond words. No wonder Luke only reports that Mary pondered these things. What was Mary thinking? It was simply too much to put into words, although, as we have seen, there is more to say about her pondering than this. The miracle of birth and, indeed, the miracle of Christ's birth, all have to be "carefully weighed," as one definition offered by *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* puts it. And as the second Lukan passage attests, this experience of amazed yet focused musing repeats itself regularly in the activity of parenting throughout the years to come.

CONCLUSION

With Mary, Protestants experience powerfully the presence of an absence. That is, Mary is most present in her absence.[66] For, as Jaroslav Pelikan concludes in his history of Mary over the centuries, the very lack of attention given Mary in Protestantism remains in a curious way a "part of the unbreakable hold that she has continued to have on the imagination of the West."[67] This presence of an absence is twofold. It entails the absence of woman as God-mediator and even as God-representative. And it entails the eclipse of women and mothers as publicly, religiously valued. Probing behind Mary's pondering disturbs this absence. Disturbing the absence by pondering over Mary's pondering opens up space to revalue maternal thought and to consider women as willing and able negotiators of God's grace and purpose.

Mary had "an inauspicious beginning" in Scripture, but Scripture left plenty of room for invention.[68] Readers cannot know literally and historically whether

Mary experienced attentive love, anguish, or awe in her deliberation. We cannot even know definitively whether the author of Luke intended to convey such an impression. But we can know that if Mary gave birth to Jesus and did the work of mothering, she likely experienced all these sentiments and much, much more. She knew Jesus first, foremost, and most profoundly. And we can move from a renewed sense of the complexity of Mary's motherhood to enriched Christian aspirations about the responsibilities and challenges of mothering today. In the very midst of her mothering—not when she got away from it all—Mary engaged in Christian reflection and prayer. In this and other ways, her pondering suggests fresh ways of embodying faith in the act of mothering.

NOTES

1. See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 129.
2. This is not to say that churches that have honored Mary have done better. Indeed, churches that esteem her most—Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox—are sometimes the least receptive to women in positions of religious leadership. Nonetheless, Protestants do well to revisit the question of Mary and the impact of her neglect. How one interprets Mary's place in Christian faith matters.
3. For the sake of this discussion, I bracket more common theological debates about Mary's motherhood—Mary mediating God as the Mother of God, *theotokos*, or God-bearer. My focus on the ordinary aspects stands in contrast to the focus on the "mystery of Mary's motherhood" in essays such as Frederick M. Jelly's "The Concrete Meaning of Mary's Motherhood" (*The Way* 45 [Summer 1982]: 30–40), which explore the meaning of *theotokos*.
4. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Treblicot (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 213.
5. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood" in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).
6. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 214; Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 24.
7. Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* (April 1960): 108; reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).
8. As a wonderful example directly related to the subject matter of this essay, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa's comments on the differences between her reading and John Dominic Crossan's reading of the same birth narratives in Matthew and Luke ("The Challenge of Christmas," *The Christian Century* [December 15, 1993]: 1270–71). For other general examples, see Christine E. Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness and Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 175–191;

Sally Purvis, "Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers: Another Look At Agape," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7:1 (Spring 1991): 19–34; Cristina Traina, "Maternal Experience and the Boundaries of Christian Sexual Ethics," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 369–405, and "Passionate Mothering: Toward an Ethic of Appropriate Parent-Child Intimacy," *Annual of Christian Ethics* 18 (1998): 177–96; and Cynthia L. Rigby, "Exploring Our Hesitation: Feminist Theologies and the Nurture of Children," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 540–554.

9. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 225.
10. Shari L. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (Boston: Houghton Miffflin Co., 1994), 107.
11. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 216–17.
12. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "'All Generations Will Call Me Blessed': Mary in Biblical and Ecumenical Perspective," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 38, no. 3 (1997): 251, emphasis in text.
13. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 70–72.
14. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 155.
15. *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 45: 40–41.
16. Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of God*, 71.
17. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Church and Family II: Church and Family in the Medieval and Reformation Periods," *New Blackfriars* (February 1984): 84.
18. This allusion is to Coventry Patmore's poem, "Angel in the House" (1856).
19. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 157.
20. Martin Luther, "Sermon on Luke 2:41–52," *Luther's Werke*, 12:409–19, cited by Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 160–61.
21. George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 107, 126–27.
22. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*, ed. William K. Tabb (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 57, 59, cited by Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 4.
23. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 149.
24. Sarah Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism': A Critique," in *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, ed. Teresa Elwes (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992), 101.
25. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), 85; and *Pure Lust* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 74, 128, cited by Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism,'" 102 (emphasis added by Coakley).
26. Shere Hite, *The Hite Report on the Family: Growing Up Under Patriarchy* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 359.
27. Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 60, 64, 104–110. Emphasis in text.
28. Ibid., 195.
29. Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separatism, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 78.

30. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1981): 80–81.
31. See below, p. 118.
32. Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism,'" 110. For another overview of feminist options, see Els Maeckelberge, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1991), ch. 1. For a book-length feminist attempt to recast Mary, see Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).
33. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 153.
34. Patrick D. Miller, "The Church's First Theologian," *Theology Today* 56, no. 3 (October 1999): 293–94.
35. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina, 1995; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 73.
36. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, 155, 158; Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (London: Burns & Oates, 1989), 14, 161.
37. Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism," 104, 110.
38. Anne Thurston, *Because of Her Testimony: The Word in Female Experience* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1995), 27.
39. See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Ideals and Realities of Motherhood: A Theological Perspective," in *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas*, ed. Julia Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 290–92.
40. Gaventa, "'All Generations Will Call Me Blessed,'" 253, emphasis in text.
41. Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 275.
42. When Martin Marty tries to summarize Miller's argument (see note 34, above), he does not, in fact, seem able to make much out of Miller's exegesis of the "silence" and so skips over to Miller's comments on the hymn of praise (*Context* [January 15, 2000]: 6).
43. Gaventa, *Mary*, 130.
44. Schaberg, "Luke," 282.
45. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 215. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).
46. Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism,'" 171.
47. Kathleen Hansley, "Supernatural Beings," *Christian Century* (April 5, 2000): 393.
48. Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 114; Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 122.
49. Weil, "Right Use of School Studies," 107.
50. Weil, "Right Use of School Studies," 113, 115.
51. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 217.
52. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos, " in *The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001), 48–74.
53. See below, p. 129.
54. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking", 223–24.

55. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 120.
56. Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 200.
57. Gaventa, "The Challenge of Christmas," 1273.
58. Migliore, "A Reformed Theological Perspective," 350.
59. Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," 216.
60. Gaventa, *Mary*, 65.
61. Kenneth Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), cited by Lucy Bregman, *Beyond Silence and Denial: Death and Dying Reconsidered* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 111.
62. John Calvin, *Commentarius*, col. 106, my emphasis, cited by Tavard, *The Thousand Faces*, 121.
63. Gaventa, *Mary*, 68.
64. Ibid., 61.
65. See below, p. 126.
66. I owe this way of putting this to my friend and colleague Paula Cooey.
67. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 222.
68. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood*, 107.