

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2010

The Rev. Nathan LeRud

“When I find myself in times of trouble Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom”. Thank you. I just wanted to get that out of the way ‘cause that’s where my mind goes when I start thinking about Mary. Today is her day. And I’ve had that song in my head for the past several days. I’m trying to – like – work it out of my system a little bit. Paul McCartney wrote “Let it Be” after a dream about his mother, who was named *Mary*, so the song is only tangentially about the Blessed Virgin Mary. But for many of us motherhood and devotion to Mary are pretty closely intertwined. In fact for centuries she’s been held up as the ultimate example of motherhood, the ultimate example of womanhood, according to some Christians, right? And usually that means something like submissive and docile and always ready to say “yes” – right? And that’s what we say about Mary, even those of us who don’t subscribe to the submissive and docile part, she said “yes” to God. The angel Gabriel came down, told her that she was highly favored and Mary said OK. My soul magnifies the Lord and I am happy to give birth to a child out of wedlock who will be put to death at a young age and will become the savior of the world. Sign me up for that! Yes, please. And we celebrate Mary on the fifteenth of August because according to a tradition that goes back to the third or fourth century this is the day on which she was assumed bodily into heaven, the Feast of the Assumption in many countries. And Anglicans, by the way Episcopalians don’t have a teaching one way or the other on that point. We’re kinda agnostic when it comes to some of these Marian traditions. So if you have some misgivings about bodily assumption into heaven, you’re OK, you’re in good company. But Mary is a figure around whom a whole host of interesting traditions and superstitions and apocrypha has accumulated; she’s got some got some street tread; she shows up in unexpected places and people have pretty intense encounters with this supposedly docile, subservient, gentile, meek and mild mother of Jesus; turns out she’s not as meek and mild as maybe we thought she was. I didn’t really get the whole Mary thing for a long time. I didn’t grow up in a tradition that was particularly interested in fostering Marian devotion. In fact if anything I picked up a pretty healthy skepticism when it came to what I was taught with superstition and sort of dangerous tendency towards idolatry, right? But over the past few years, over the past year actually,

Mary and I have gotten a little bit closer and not to put too fine a point on it, but we've had a "come to Jesus moment" – Mary and I -- literally, right? And I think that's how she works, I think that's what she's for; she brings us to Jesus or brings Jesus to us, maybe – she's the God-bearer, she's the Theotokos, the first one to make God manifest in human form, to literally give birth to the living presence of God in our midst. And there are hundreds of legends and stories and traditions about Mary's various appearances and apparitions over the years, right? The one though, the one that has most marked my life, the place where I found Mary is at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lavang here in Portland and I just want to share this story with you because Mary caught me by surprise. I think sometimes that's exactly how she works. The story actually begins in Vietnam about two hundred years ago in the late seventeen hundreds, early eighteen hundreds. Roman Catholicism was against the law in Vietnam. Many Catholics were being brutally tortured and killed by government officials and in the area surrounding Lavang in Central Vietnam Catholics fled into the jungle and they got sick, they were bitten by snakes and I don't know what all. The life was tough there in the jungle and one night as they gathered in the grove to pray the rosary a lady was there among them wearing the traditional Ao-dai dress of a Vietnamese woman and holding a baby in her arms. She told the people to boil the leaves of a certain tree to cure their illness and so they did. And she appeared several times over the course of the next several years of persecution. Gradually the site became a shrine. The people built a simple church there out of leaves and rice straw. The site began to attract pilgrims. In 1805 thirty people were killed at the site when the government forces attempted to destroy this shrine. It had become this incredible sort of focal point and the altar and the altar light survived the attack and a new church was built on the site several years later and in 1901 – about a hundred years ago, the first annual Shrine of our Lady of Lavang took place. A hundred and thirty thousand people from all across the country participated. And in 1961 the Shrine was declared the National Shrine of the people of Vietnam and Pope John XXIII declared it a minor Basilica. So as Our Lady of Guadalupe has become for many Mexicans and Central Americans, Our Lady of La Vang is become a beloved figure for many South Asians. And the story of our Lady of Lavang is an interesting one; it's become my favorite of the Marian apparition stories.

So you fast forward to the twentieth century. On Northeast 57th and Sandy here in Portland there is a pretty good sized, but kinda hidden away campus. It's

hidden from the road by a wall and a fence and some high trees; it's right next to the Masonic Lodge on 57th and Sandy with a little statue of George Washington there on the corner and there's a gothic looking building that kinda peeks over the tops of some high trees, but if you're not looking for it you probably won't see it. The Sisters of the Holy Child of Jesus operated an academy here until the late 1970's and by the late 70's as some of you probably know, Portland was being flooded by refugees from Cambodia and Laos and Vietnam and so The Holy Child Academy, formerly the Holy Child Academy became the site of the Southeast Asian Vicariate and was dedicated to Our Lady of Lavang. The Southeast Asian Vicariate in Portland has become a center for church agencies that assists refugees and immigrants not only from South Asian countries, but refugees from Ethiopia and Haiti and San Salvador, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, parts of Africa; it's a site of assistance and mercy for those who have nowhere else to turn and there on the grounds of the Vicariate, there's a little Shrine, a little grotto with a stream running through it, a little bridge over to the other side of the stream and there stands a beautiful Asian woman wearing an Ao-dai and a crown and holding a child in her arms just as she might have appeared in the jungle of Lavang two hundred years ago.

The Mary that is familiar to many westerners – right -- dark hair, big eyes is dressed in blue and pink and stars on her gown; that Mary bears very little resemblance to this slight Vietnamese woman at Our Lady of Lavang, but for me, she's Mary; she's my Mary. And that little shrine there just off Sandy Boulevard is where she found me.

When I moved back to Portland from the East coast a year ago, I moved in with some friends, who are both Roman Catholic women interestingly enough; So when you walked into our house you were hit with this wall of icons and many of them are Marian icons. It was kinda like this full throttle humbling over the head of Mary and her saintly friends. So she was on my mind; she was in our house, I saw her, Mary was around. And I remember the first time I stumbled onto that shrine at Our Lady of Lavang. It was dark; it was incredibly foggy, a night in December just before Christmas and I was gonna walk around the neighborhood with this friend of mine. We were talking about all kinds of things, including Mary – she came up -- I don't know how she came up, but she did and there we were suddenly at this South Asia Vicariate and the gates were open. It must have been eleven o'clock or midnight and it was like stepping into another world, like

stepping into a dream. The fog was thick and the light from the moon was bright and there was this imposing and kinda frightening statue of St. Michael the Archangel I think it was, right at the entrance with his sword over his head. Talked about being scared away, but we wandered in to the very back of the property and right there, right up against Sandy Boulevard – there she was. It was like she had been waiting for us peering out of the fog, white and mysterious and I was filled with this sense of peace and expectation that I can't quite describe, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her face. And over the next few weeks I felt like something was pulling me back there. I couldn't get that face out of my mind. Catherine preached a sermon that December just before Christmas about Mary and what it means to be favored by God and she reminded us that to be favored means to be called, right – being called by God and so Mary is an example for us because all of us are called by God and Mary shows us what it means to answer that call. You say “Yes” – you say yes wherever that yes is going to take you; you say yes. And it might great joy, it probably means great pain – you say yes. So a few weeks' later just after Christmas I came back to Our Lady of Lavang. I was wrestling with a call a little bit, trying not to be fearful about the next step forward, hoping to be called here to Trinity, anxious though about my future and in the midst of this period of uncertainty and I felt this overwhelming need to be with Mary, a need that I had not felt before, so I wandered over to the shrine and I was alone, but she was there. I don't know how else to describe it – she was there and I'm not particularly, I'm not superstitious, but there was love there, I don't know how else to describe it. There was love and there was peace and I said a little prayer. I asked for guidance, but mostly I just needed to be there and sit with her. She calms down my anxieties, more than that she reminded me that whatever happened I was going to be all right. I was gonna be OK. And in that moment I knew that sense of peace, deeply in my bones. I knew that saying “yes” doesn't mean making one choice or another choice; it means that God is with you no matter what happens and I had to say “yes” to letting myself go a little bit regardless of what happened. Saying “yes” means opening your hands and letting something fill them. What's next? Right? Here I am. What's next?

The reason why I love the story of Our Lady of Lavang is that unlike Fatima and Lords and hosts of other more famous apparitions, when Mary appeared in the forests of Vietnam she didn't bring a warning, she didn't come to judge, she didn't come to call people back from their sin or whatever, she just came to love them and to give them some advise on caring for their sick, but she came to heal and I

think that's an incredibly powerful vision of who Mary is. She's not docile – right? She's not gentle, meek or mild. She's a power house! She sat on a donkey for days carrying a child that she didn't really understand and I can't imagine but that must have been an incredibly frightening and confusing reality for a teenage girl and then her heart was pierced with this kind of incredible sorrow that I think only parents can begin to understand. So she's no pushover – Mary, but she has power and for those of us who are a little bit fed up with images of God that are full of testosterone and violence, Mary represents a difference image of what God's power, what God's presence is like. She comes as a healer. She comes when she's needed and she doesn't have to say very much – just being there is enough. She doesn't need to give advice; she doesn't have to make judgments or settle disputes. She doesn't even take sides. She just shows up and all of the noise and all of the chaos and the confusion just kind of ebbs away. She has grace; she has radiance; she is radiant; she glows and without being a pushover, Mary's answer is always “Yes”. She brings the presence of God, wild and unpredictable and deep and silent and radiant she brings that grace and that power with her in her wake and we come closest to Mary I think in those moments when we most need that presence, when we most need that part of who God is. Like it's like Paul McCartney says “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom.” But the words of wisdom that she speaks are simple and thirty years after the song came out they may be a little bit maudlin, but no less true. “Let it be” Which is another way of translating that great Hebrew word that God's people have uttered over the centuries when they're called out by God. In Hebrew the word is *Hineni* “Here I am” – Here I am with open hands, ready for whatever is to come next. Moses says it to the burning bush – *Hineni* “Here I am”. Samuel says it when he hears God calling him in the night; Abraham says it when God calls him to give up everything that he has and it's the word that Luke puts in Mary's mouth when the angel called on her -- *Hineni* -- “Here I am, servant of the Lord, Let it be with me according to God's will”. Let it be with me according to God's will --let it be, which is not “leave it alone”, which is how I used to kind of hear that line when the Beatles sing it, not chill out, man or you're stuck with what's bothering you, you know, don't sweat it, right – that's not where it's going. No, let it happen, let it unfold, let it start. Here I am! What's next? Whatever is to come – *Let it be*. Wherever I am to go, let it be. There will be an answer and the answer is always “Yes”. The answer is always yes. Amen