

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Many Lutheran churches pay little attention to festivals remembering saints, like the one we celebrate today. Zion is a bit unusual in that way. I've had questions concerning our prayers "for the faithful departed." To be sure, they used to be listed in our bulletin that way — I've changed that language, but we have never prayed "for" the departed. We pray in their remembrance. We give thanks to God for their example of life and faith, exactly as our Augsburg Confession says, "Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling" (Augsburg Confession, XXI:1). Thus, today we commemorate St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord.

The Blessed Virgin Mary played a pivotal role in the story of our salvation. Just ask any young Sunday School girl who hoped to play the coveted role of Mary in the church's Christmas Eve program. These girls knew how important Mary was to the story of Jesus' incarnation, and therefore ultimately, to our salvation, and they were right.

Mary was an ordinary woman, still a young virgin maid, to be sure, but ordinary. That is to say, she suffered from the same affliction that has plagued mankind ever since Eve took of the fruit and ate and gave it to Adam to eat also. That is, Mary was a sinner who was in need of a savior. So she sang in her beautiful canticle, the Magnificat: "*my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.*" From the fall of Adam, Scripture speaks of only one man who was free from sin, and that is Jesus. He is man who shared in our flesh and blood. He became man so that He might deliver mankind from sin and death and the power of the devil. Yea, He became our brother in every respect save one — He was without sin (Heb. 4:15) — that He might "*make propitiation for the sins of the people*" (Heb. 2:14-17). For this was the Father's purpose in sending His Son: to save sinners: "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Therefore, regardless how reasonable and fitting it might seem, Mary was neither "preserved from the stain of original sin" — Rome calls that the Immaculate Conception — nor did she "by a special grace from God" commit "no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life" (CCC, 411). That's what Pope Pius IX declared infallibly in 1854; but if that were so, why did Mary have to die? Death is the consequence of sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23), and if she were sinless, she would not have needed to pass through death to life. But even though Rome celebrates this day as the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary — another unscriptural dogma that says that Mary was assumed bodily into heaven without

experiencing corruption — Rome at least intimates that Jesus' blessed mother died. She "was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave," Pope Pius XII wrote in 1950. Also, she endured the "struggle which was common to the Blessed Virgin and her divine Son" (*Munificentissimus Deus*). Remember, Simeon foretold that Jesus' cross would be "*a sword [that would] pierce through [her] own soul also*" (Luke 2:35). Thus, the Eastern Church and many liturgical churches around the world celebrate this day as the Dormition of Mary, the Mother of God in remembrance of Mary's falling asleep in Jesus.

Thus, Mary was an ordinary sinner like the rest of us conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity (Ps. 51:5); and yet, she was unique, which we would do well to remember. Mary is the woman that all generations call blessed. Mary is the maid uniquely favored by God to bear His only Son and to give Him flesh (Lu. 1:30). Mary is the only woman upon whom the Holy Spirit came and overshadowed and conceived in her, without the assistance of a husband, the Son of the Most High God (Lu. 1:32, 35). Only Mary's womb for a time became the dwelling place of God, that she might give birth to God's own Son, who is Himself God. Only Mary's breasts suckled the infant Jesus, Christ the Lord.

Mary uniquely was called upon to be the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, but much more than that, as she was proclaimed to be at the Council of Ephesus in 431. She was called to be the θεοτόκος, the Mother of God. We Lutherans don't balk at this title as some Protestants do. We don't ally ourselves with the 5<sup>th</sup> century heretic Nestorius who refused this title to Mary.

It does seem odd to think about: that the eternal God could be born. Yet, it's a simple argument and straightforward. To think rightly about it, one has to keep in mind the person of the Son, the eternal Word of God. Jesus is that person, God's eternal Son, God of God, very God of very God, as we confessed moments ago. That person of the Son then brought the flesh he received from Mary into His person — He assumed humanity into God, as we say in the Athanasian Creed — and was born of her. Mary is the Mother of Jesus; Jesus is God. Therefore, Mary is the Mother of God.

Thus, after Jesus' conception in her womb, when Mary traveled to see her cousin Elizabeth, herself great with her child John, the forerunner of Christ, Elizabeth greeted Mary with effusive praise. In the presence of her Lord and her God, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" John also joined in this praise in the only way he could. He leaped for joy in his mother's womb when he heard the sound of Mary's voice.

It wasn't that Mary herself was the Savior of the world; her Son was, who would bear the name Jesus, which means the Lord is salvation. Mary's firstborn son was the offspring promised of old who would crush the serpent's head. Mary acknowledged as much. Again, she rejoiced in God her Savior. She magnified Him — holy and mighty and merciful. Mary rejoiced in her Son, who scatters the proud and brings down the mighty, who exalts the humble and fills the hungry.

Mary's role was not to do with respect to salvation, but to receive. This is the role of all believers. Mary received the good news that she would bear the Savior of the world. Mary received the favor of God, spoken by the angel. Mary received the marvelous news that the Holy Spirit would miraculously conceive in her this child. Mary received this miracle with faith, as all believers do. *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”* (Lu. 1:38). *“[B]lessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”*

Mary is not the Savior, and she is not a redemptrix, “co” or otherwise, simply because her womb was the receptacle of God's work of redemption. God Himself redeemed the world burdened by the weight of the law. He did it by sending His Son in the fullness of time as He had promised. Truly, Christ alone is the world's redeemer!

Most recently, Pope John Paul II exalted the Blessed Virgin to the point where many thought he might declare Mary co-redemptrix, as Pius IX declared her to be immaculately conceived, and Pius XII declared her to be assumed bodily into heaven. But neither the current pope Francis nor the previous pope Benedict believes that Mary should be declared so. Indeed, Benedict, prior to his ascension as pope, declared, “The formula ‘co-redemptrix’ departs to too great an extent from the language of Scripture and of the Fathers, and therefore gives rise to misunderstandings.” ¶ “Everything comes from Him [Christ] ...; Mary, too, is everything she is through Him” ... “The word ‘co-redemptrix’ would obscure this origin” (Inés San Martín, “Once again, Pope Francis says Mary is not the ‘co-redemptrix’,” [angelusnews.com](http://angelusnews.com), March 24, 2021).

However, as I already mentioned, that a teaching “departs ... from the language of Scripture” has been no obstacle to popes. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception has no Scriptural basis. And with that dogma in place, the Assumption of Mary into heaven was easy enough to declare without a Scriptural basis. It is simply “reasonable and fitting,” said the pope's declaration, that our Lord Jesus would not have let the body of His mother be “turned into ashes or given over to be food for worms” (*Munificentissimus Deus*).

We don't ape Rome in these made up stories as we remember Mary today. Rather, we celebrate a simple festival of the Mother of our Lord, remembering this humble handmaid of the Lord, who brought forth her firstborn Son, our Savior and our Redeemer, who by His cross crushed Satan and his dastardly works of sin and death. We give thanks to God for Mary and honor her, not for her own sake, but for her willingness to serve as a vessel of the Lord. We rejoice especially in her example of faith and devotion to her Son and seek to follow in the way she trod. And contrary to Rome's hopes that the dogma of the Assumption might "make our belief in our own resurrection stronger and render it more effective" (*Munificentissimus Deus*), we say, our faith in our resurrection comes not from this unscriptural and so unsure dogma of Rome, but on the fact that "*Christ has been raised from the dead,*" and He is "*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Indeed, while we honor Mary today, we affirm without wavering: our hope is only in "Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary." He alone "is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity." And Lutherans everywhere join together in saying, "This is most certainly true" (Luther, Small Catechism, Creed, Article II explanation).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.