Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Barbara: I'm Sister Barbara Reid, I'm a Dominican sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I am the president of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where I've been on the faculty since 1988, teaching New Testament studies. I earned my Ph D, at the Catholic University of America, and after I completed that, I came to C T. U, and have been here ever since. And it is it is my privilege to lead this institution where we prepare men and women both for are all kinds of ministries in the church, seminarians, religious order seminarians who are preparing for ordained ministry and other kinds of ministries as brothers, and many sisters, and lay women and men, preparing for a whole variety of ministries at C.T.U.

And as a New Testament professor, I've been very privileged to be part of a faculty that is, we jokingly say, every time we have five minutes we write another book, And so it's been my privilege to be part of a very supportive faculty where where we have had the opportunity to contribute our work in our thinking to the wider church. I think the project that I'm that I'm most engrossed in right now, and have been for the last dozen years, is the Wisdom Commentary series which is published by Liturgical Press, and it's the first commentary series - Bible commentary series - on every book of the Bible, written from a feminist perspective, And my colleague Shelly Matthews, who teaches at Brite Divinity School, and I, we authored the volume on Luke, and so some of the things that I was sharing in the In the podcast are in our first volume of the On the Gospel of Luke, in the Wisdom Commentary series by Liturgical Press.

And so I'd invite you to explore more in that series. Also, if you're new to feminist Biblical interpretation, or if you're not sure you understand or want to be identified with that approach to Biblical interpretation, I'd invite you to to look at my book Wisdom's Feast, which is published by Eerdman's, and in that book - it's a basic introduction to feminist biblical interpretation and using about ten different examples of how to apply that in the Bible, both the Old and New Testament. So thank you for the opportunity to share that information. And so, if folks are interested in pursuing further, some of the offerings that are available at CTU, you can visit our website at at www.ctu.edu, there's lots of free stuff on our website and lots of lectures and events that we live stream, and then record, that you can access any time from our website.

Anne: The first question I have is, could you could just give a brief overview of what we know of Mary, Jesus' mother from The Gospels?

Barbara: Luke has the most extensive description of Mary. In the first two chapters of the gospel, she plays the major role. The spotlight is pretty much on Mary in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel: the famous scene of the Annunciation, and then her visitation to Elizabeth, and then the Magnificat that is sung and recited in the church every evening, that's at the end of the first chapter of Luke's gospel. And then the second chapter with her giving birth to Jesus, and then the powerful scene of the presentation in the Temple, where Simeon addresses her directly about the meaning of this child. And so the spotlight is pretty much on Mary in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel.

She'll disappear from the rest of Luke's gospel until chapter eight in verse nineteen, when she and Jesus' siblings come looking for Jesus. And this is the episode where Jesus talks

about who his true kindred are, and in the Synoptic Gospels, there's this theme of Jesus creating a new family of disciples. And so Luke positions that as right after the parable of the seed that falls on all different kinds of soil, and as Luke positions the story, it implies that Jesus' mother and family can be among the good soil and the fruitful seeds, which softens that episode considerably from the way Mark and Matthew tell the story. In Mark and Matthew - in Mark, especially - it's really rather harsh, where Jesus seems to be rejecting his mother and his family, and that they're not part of his family of disciples, and another episode in Mark, where really Mary and Jesus' siblings come to get him and bring him home because they think he's crazy.

And so Mary appears very little in Mark and Matthew's gospels. The first chapters of Matthew focus all on Joseph, and Joseph's dream. And so Mary's there, but we never hear anything about what she's thinking, what's happening from her perspective. So, then, so, Luke has the most. But after that episode with the true kindred of Jesus, in chapter eight of Luke, she disappears from the rest of the Gospel, and she doesn't resurface again in the Lukan writings until Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles. And so in the opening chapter, in chapter one, verse fourteen, of Acts of the Apostles, Mary is explicitly named as being in the upper room with the disciples, waiting for the experience of Pentecost, and she will be there when that happens, but we hear nothing more beyond that. That's all we know from the Gospel of Luke, and from Acts of the Apostles.

And the one other gospel, of course, which has a different set of traditions, is the Gospel of John, and there she appears in two episodes - two very, very important episodes. She appears in chapter two, at the wedding feast of Cana, and then she appears at the end of the gospel, she's named among the women that are standing at the foot of the cross. And one of the literary techniques that the evangelist of the fourth gospel uses is bookends, or or an inclusio, And so that's what Mary is doing in that gospel, is she is forming an inclusio, really, around the whole entire gospel story in the fourth gospel, and in that gospel there's a very strong theme of birthing of new life. And so, in that gospel the stage is set already from the prologue that talks about how believers are born as children of God, and how the way we are born as children of God is through faith in the Logos.

And so, in chapter two, the first episode in which people begin to believe in Jesus is the Cana episode. That's the concluding line to that episode. And it's Jesus's mother - who, by the way, is never named in the Gospel of John, she's always just referred to as Jesus' mother - and she, in chapter two at Cana, she is the one that recognizes that it's time, and so it is the moment for the birthing of Jesus's public ministry. So the one who gave him physical birth is then the midwife of the birthing of the public ministry of Jesus. And then arching to the end of the story, she's there at the foot of the cross, witnessing the completion of that earthly ministry, and then the birthing of the renewed children of God, or the renewed community of beloved disciples, that will carry on the mission that he birthed in that gospel, and she is again playing a midwife role to bridge that.

And so in that gospel, a very powerful scene at the end of the gospel, where Jesus's mother is then entrusted to the beloved disciple, who's never named in this gospel, either. And it's really a way in which the fourth evangelist resolves that question about the relationship of the true kindred of Jesus, or the children of God, and it's both those who are bound to Jesus by blood ties, represented in his mother, and all those who have come to believe in him

embodied symbolically in the beloved disciple, and they're entrusted to one another, and together they carry on the mission that Jesus birthed.

So that's a quick overview of where Mary appears in the Gospels, and beyond that we know nothing more about what happened to her. There are lots of traditions. And, of course, if you visit the remains of the ancient city of Ephesus, in Turkey, you will be shown the house where so-called disciple John took Mary to live ever after, as people interpret that final scene in John where she appears, as the beloved disciple, who people falsely equate with John, the son of Zebedee, and think of him now taking care of her.

I think the symbolism is much deeper and not in that direction at all. But traditions have grown up around that. And so what happened to Mary after the end of what's recorded about her in the New Testament? Lots of legends, lots of traditions, and, of course, the tradition that she was not buried after she died, but was assumed into heaven. And so, in Jerusalem, they'll commemorate that at Dormition Abbey.

But what the Gospels tell us is what I sketched out previously, and then, beyond that, lots more speculation, because she's always been such an important figure for Christians, and especially for Catholic Christians.

Anne: In your writing, you refer to Mary as a prophet. I would love it if you could expand a bit more on that and also speak a bit about some of the parallels we see between her and some of the Old Testament prophets.

Barbara: One of the things that I've observed about the infancy narratives, and especially the story of the annunciation to Mary, is that the Annunciation story follows the same pattern that other annunciations of birth stories have in the in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, and this is very well sketched out by Raymond Brown of Blessed Memory in his book, The Birth of the Messiah. There’s the same pattern as the annunciation of the birth of Ishmael in Genesis seventeen, birth of Isaac, also in Genesis seventeen, the birth of Samson, in Judges thirteen. So it follows the same pattern, and in those annunciation of birth stories, their function is to help the reader, the hearer, to understand the identity of the significant person being born and their role in salvation history.

And so there are usually the same elements in all of those annunciation of birth stories: there's the appearance of an angel or a messenger of God, there's fear on the part of the person receiving the message, they're given a heavenly message, there's usually an objection, but very often a reassurance, the name of the person is given, the significance of the figure to be born, and to reassure them, when they object, usually a sign is given. And so we can see all of those elements in the annunciation of the birth of Jesus to Mary.

But what I find very interesting is that those are also almost all the same elements that you find in call stories of prophets in the Old Testament. So if you compare Exodus 3, the call of Moses, for example, the story starts out with the person having an unexpected encounter with the Divine, and it happens in the midst of ordinary, everyday life, and the person resists. So Moses, for example, is going about his everyday business shepherding his sheep, when there's a bush that's burning and not being consumed. And then there is something that the messenger conveys about what the prophet is to do on God's behalf, and every good

prophet worth their salt always resists. So Moses resists, he says he's not good at speaking, and so he's got a good excuse. And Jeremiah thinks he's too young, and Isaiah thinks he's got unclean lips, And Mary's objection is probably the best of all - that what you're asking is physically impossible.

And so, in calls of prophets, the divine messenger always gives a reassurance, always insists that there will be divine assistance. And in Mary's case, of course, it's crystal clear, it's said straight out: of course, it's impossible for you, but nothing is impossible for God, and God always has a way around it. So for Moses, no problem. Your brother and your sister are also prophets, and they speak quite well and they can aid you in this ministry. And so God's always got a solution. With Mary, it's: of course you can't do this, and no prophet ever can do what God is asking on their own. And so it will always be through the spirit, and in most calls of prophets, the spirit is explicitly mentioned, as in the Annunciation to Mary, that it is the spirit that will bring about what God wants to be done. And then, very often a tangible, concrete sign of reassurance. For Moses, it's the bush that's burned but isn't consumed. For Mary, the sign is that her kinswoman, Elizabeth, is also going to bear a child, which also would have seemed very impossible at her advanced age.

So I see the same kinds of things in the Annunciation story that we see in the call of prophets, and I see Mary acting in a very prophetic way when she utters the Magnificat. And in this she quite resembles other female prophets from the Old Testament. Miriam, who is leading the singing and the dancing, and, in Exodus Fifteen has that canticle that is proclaimed after the Israelites have crossed the Red Sea - you can see many of the exact same phrases and themes from that song in Mary's Magnificat. Most Biblical scholars also call attention to the strong resemblance between Hannah's song in First Samuel 2 and the Magnificat. Judith's song of victory is in chapter sixteen of Judith, Deborah's victory song is in Judges Five.

So there are women prophets. Now a couple that I just named are not explicitly called prophets in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, there are five women who are specifically named Prophets, and that's Miriam in Exodus 15:20, it's Deborah in Judges 4:4, Huldah in Second Kings, 22, and Second Chronicles 34. And then there's an unnamed woman with whom Isaiah fosters a child in Isaiah 8:3, who's called a prophet, and then Noadiah in Nehemiah 6:14. There are also references in Joel 3 and Ezekiel 13 to daughters who prophesy. So there are women in the Old Testament who exercise this role of prophet, and in the New Testament there are as well.

In the second chapter of Luke, we'll meet Anna, who is praying and prophesying in the Temple for 84 years. In Acts twenty-one, nine, there are four virgin daughters of Philip that are said to be prophets. We never learn their names and we never hear anything of what they prophesy, but it's noted there in Acts 21. Same with the women in First Corinthians 11:5, Paul speaks about the women who are exercising prophecy in the Corinthian Assembly.

So what is a prophet, a Biblical prophet? And why do I see Mary as a prophet? Well, essentially a prophet is a vessel of divine communication. It's a person who is called to listen deeply to the groans of the people, and listen deeply to God's desire for wellbeing for all, and to be the conduit between the people's groans and hopes, and God's desire for wellbeing.

And so essentially a prophet is a vessel of divine communication, and their dual vocation, if you will, is both to denounce any kind of injustice - I think Jeremiah gets the prize on that one, Jeremiah seems to be the prophet of doom and gloom more than anybody else, sees the injustices and denounces them over and over and over. But that's only one half of the prophets job. The other half of the prophet's job is to announce hope. And so I see Mary doing that very clearly in the Magnificat - that she is denouncing what is wrong in preventing God's reign coming to fuller expression in our world, and announcing another way that it could be if God's dream for humanity and for the planet were followed and fulfilled. And so I see that very strongly in her Magnificat.

Anne: And speaking of the Magnificat, one of the things I found so interesting in your writing is that you speak about the Magnificat as being a subversive song, and particularly subversive around in the context of Roman rule. What are the clues in the text that point to that?

Barbara: You know, we sing and recite the Magnificat so often that I think it's been very easy for us to glide over what it would have sounded like in Mary's day, in Jesus's day, in the communities of early Christians. I think that one of the things that pops out once you begin to think about the context in which this hymn is articulated, as I mentioned, one of the strong parallels with this hymn is the victory hymn in Exodus 15, and other parallels with the hymns of Judith and Deborah. These are militant songs that are proclaiming what God has done in victory over our enemies, and how God has rescued the people, and God has done this with God's strong arm.

Now, another comment is the militaristic language in it, that feminists like myself would have trouble with today, as the kind of language that we want to use to express what God does on our behalf. But anyway, I think anybody in Jesus's Day, in Mary's Day, in those early Christian communities would have recognized that the hymn - and by the way, you know, I think that while we refer to it as Mary's hymn, I don't think the historical mother of Jesus composed this hymn, we see several hymns in those first chapters of Luke that are canticles, hymns, if you will, that the early Christian communities were singing in their gatherings, and that Luke has said, “Oh, that would go perfect right here in the story,” and so he puts it on Mary's lips; interestingly enough, in some of the manuscripts of Luke's gospel, it's on Elizabeth’s lips - so, but anyway, my point is that this is an ancient hymn that goes way back with resonances with other Old Testament victory hymns. and that's been adapted and modified to reflect what's the current situation of the Christian communities that are now singing this hymn.

And so, as we look at what's in the hymn, one of the things that doesn't sound subversive to us, with all the familiarity that we have with the hymn, is just the titles that she gives God. For instance, she calls God “Lord Saviour,” “Mighty One,” as she is singing about all that God has done to rescue God's people, and while that language does not sound subversive to us, that's standard God language for us, but in Jesus's day, Mary's day, anybody would have recognized those are the same titles that the emperor loves for himself, to appropriate to himself. So saviour - for instance, there are a number of inscriptions that we have where the emperor is called Saviour of the Universe - well, you'll notice that in Luke's gospel, in particular, there are more references to Jesus as saviour and God as saviour than in any of the other New Testament writings, and I think it's a deliberate way to say under your breath,

“This is contradicting the Imperial claims.” So if the emperor thinks you're the Saviour of the Universe - oh no, you're not! There's only one and it isn't you. And so it's deliberately pointing toward, God is the only one that is Lord and Saviour, Mighty One.

You know, another thing is the verse 48, which talks about God looking upon the humiliation of Mary. And then, in verse 52 of the Magnificat, she sings about God lifting up all the humiliated. I first need to say something about the translation of the term that's there in the Greek text. So we usually translate the word *tapeinosis* as humility rather than humiliation or humbleness or lowliness, and that's not what the term means. It means humiliated. And so Mary is identifying, calling herself humiliated, and identifying with all those who are most humiliated. And that's the stand that a prophet always takes. A prophet always stands with the neediest of the people, and the ones who feel most left out, most oppressed, most tamped down. And so when Mary sings about God looking upon the humiliation of those who are most oppressed, and God then lifting up all those who are humiliated - what she's singing about, what God does, God does exactly the opposite of what those who rely on Imperial power do. Those who use Imperial tactics to assert their power look upon humiliated people in a way to keep them humiliated, to keep them oppressed, to keep them downtrodden, and God does the exact opposite. God does it to lift up those who are humiliated.

And an even more powerful nuance that you can see underneath this is that the verb *tapeinoo* is used a number of times, at least six or seven times in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, to talk about sexual humiliation of a woman who has been raped, and so one particular nuance in Mary's Magnificat can be her voicing the dream, the hope that when God's reign is fulfilled, no one need worry about being overpowered and sexually humiliated by another. And it was well known that that was a weapon of war then and now, and so an end to that. She sings, too, about peacefulness.

She also sings about filling up the hungry, and that doesn't sound terribly subversive, but keeping poor people poor, and hungry people hungry, is a tactic of an oppressive and colonizing power, and keeping people always food insecure, and focusing on where is their next meal going to come from, is a tactic of of oppression. And so in Mary's day the Imperial powers would have been touting that this is a time of prosperity and a time of great harvest and abundance of food. Well, yes - for the top tiny percent of the elite, but not the majority of the people. And to kind of put some concretization on what that means, for instance, in our own day - well, this is a few years ago now, but back in the back in the late eighties, early nineties, when the Sendero Luminoso was - the Shining Path guerillas - were terrorizing the people of Peru, one of the things that women did was to organize big common kitchens, and they would feed people out of these huge, big common pots. But they didn't just feed people the soup or the stews that they were cooking up, but they also fed people with hope by proclaiming the Gospel by talking about God's liberating ways, and a number of them lost their lives for doing that.

And so this is not a nice lullaby that Mary is singing, This is a powerful hymn, that both exalts God's saving deeds in the past, but also counts on God to continue to save, to liberate, in the future, and ways that overturn unjust systems, not just in individual acts of mercy and kindness, but ways that get at the root causes of injustice and overturn those. I also pause at that line where she sings about casting down the mighty from their thrones, and lifting up the

humiliated. I think some people might hear that as, well, you just reverse things, you just put the ones who are on the bottom, put them on the top, and the ones who are on the top, you get to go on the bottom now. But I rather suspect that it's not the dynamic that is envisioned in that hymn, that it has to be a two way movement of those who are most downtrodden being lifted up, and those who have power, privilege and status, needing to relinquish that in order to meet in the middle, where all are equal, brothers and sisters around the same table, and yes, differences in status et cetera, but those differences not having any meaning in the community of disciples that are sharing the same table.

So those are some of the dynamics that I see going on in the Magnificat, which is not such a sweet lullaby. And then in the gospel, this is Mary singing the Magnificat, Luke sets that in the visitation scene, when Mary is visiting her kinswoman, Elizabeth. And so it's envisioned as being in a domestic setting, which is the proper place for women of her day, most women of her day. She doesn't go out into the streets singing and shouting this message. But her son will. He will, in chapter four, his first public appearance at the synagogue in Nazareth, in Luke 4:18, he will use the words of the prophet Isaiah to announce himself and announce his mission as a liberating mission with the same themes, the same kinds of things that Mary is singing about in the Magnificat. And I like to think, well, where do you think you got it? You know, with a mother who sings like this while she's putting you to sleep.

Now, let me backtrack on that this is not a lullaby, this is a militant song. And so and so he imbibes that, and it will be he that then takes it public in the rest of the gospel, and then the disciples that he forms, that will continue that on.

Anne: In your writing, you also say that Mary really challenges the kind of concept of the ideal Roman woman. Can you explain a bit more about that?

Barbara: I would say, you know, I resist stereotyping the ideal woman in any culture or context, because many think that the ideal woman in Mary's day never left the house, was subservient to her husband, et cetera, but we know very well from inscriptions and from literary evidence that there were women - especially elite women - who had very public roles, and who were patrons, and who were leaders. And so I want to resist any kind of stereotyping.

But what I would observe is that when we read the Annunciation and the Magnificat from the angle that I've been proposing, and seeing Mary as a strong woman with a prophetic message, and who deals directly with God's messenger. There's no intermediary, there's no going through her husband, or her son, or her father - she deals directly with God's messenger. She receives the message directly herself. She responds directly on her own. She's given a choice, she's not doing anybody's bidding, there's no male in her life that’s directing her to do this. She is freely choosing to say yes to what God is asking. And that's a key component both in any prophets accepting of what God is asking. It's never forced on a person, a person always has the freedom to say yes or no. And it's the same way with disciples, as we'll see in the gospel. You can see the same parallels that I was outlining of what are the elements in a prophetic call. Those are also the same elements that we’ll see in the call of disciples in the Gospels. And so a person always has the ability to say yes or no to God.

But what I see in the scene with Mary is rather different, I think, than what many people have seen in the Annunciation scene, where they emphasize Mary as docile, as humble, as self-effacing, as “whatever you want, I'll do whatever you say. Almost a puppet of God, and God never calls puppets. God always wants a person who, out of an autonomous, strong sense of self, makes a free choice to make God and God's work the centre of their life and not their own desires. And Mary exemplifies that, right at the start of Luke's gospel.

And I see her as a strong woman who questions, who thinks on her own, who, we’re told twice more, in chapter two in verse nineteen, and then in verse fifty one, that she ponders all these things that she experiences and that she hears from God. And she's not just sitting in a corner, thinking about all this and wondering, but the words that are used there in those verses really point toward her theologizing, her paying careful attention to the word that is spoken, and the things that she experiences of how God is actIng in her world, and like a good theologian, reflects on that and thinks about it, and engages in theological interpretation of what is God doing now in this present moment in our lives, and then doesn't just keep it to herself, but shares that out openly as she does in the Magnificat.

And so I see her as a strong woman with a sense of self-direction, a model theologian, one who understands the systems and analyzes what is keeping poor people poor, and hungry people hungry, and dispossessed people downtrodden, and what is needed in order for them to take their rightful place. And so, how the meek and mild image of Mary has been used over centuries, is many times it has been used to keep other women in our society in positions of subservience and obedience to men. And so an image of Mary, a strong woman, who is able to communicate directly with God and interpret what God is doing for her people, and be that kind of conduit that a prophet is, that opens up a very different understanding of Mary, and a very different role model not just for women Christians, but for men as well. You know, many times the image of Mary as meek and subservient has been put forward as the model for the ideal woman in a patriarchal society, both then and now. And what I'd like to suggest is that she's a model believer, a model who has heard the Word of God and responded in the manner that God desires, to accomplish God's will. And that's - and she can be a model in that for both men and women, not just for women.

Anne: I think we’ve covered everything that I wanted to ask about. Is there anything that you wanted to add to that, that I maybe didn't get around to asking?

Barbara: Maybe I’ll just add that in Roman Catholic tradition, we have held Mary in such very high regard that we've almost bordered on idolizing her, and many of the things that we attribute to Mary are really attributes of God. And I think it's another important avenue that we can explore is how what we have always put on Mary seems to reflect our innate instinct that a male image of God doesn't capture everything for us that we know God is.

And so one thing that Catholics have had to be careful about, because we get closest to doing this of anybody, is making Mary into a female image of God, or sometimes she's been called the feminine face of God. And I really resist that, I think that what this direction can point us toward is that it is that - well, first of all, resisting any gender stereotyping. You know, that sweetness, docility, receptivity, gentleness does not only belong to women. And so we could say those same things of Jesus, we could say those same things of the Creator.

So there are implications of what we say about Mary, that also goes hand in hand with what we say about Jesus. what we say about God, what we say about the Spirit.

And so stretching our imaginations to find language and imagery that embodies more accurately for us a God who goes beyond gender, and where patriarchal images of God are not adequate to say that. I think some of what we put on Mary has revealed that deep down instinct that we know that these qualities that we more often associate with females are God-like qualities as well. And then that helps the reverse side of the coin, is that male and female are made in God's image and likeness. And so what we say about what we say about God is, also has implications for how we understand ourselves as made in God's image and likeness, and what that calls us to be and do and act like