

[Isaiah 61:10-11](#)

[Galatians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 1:46-55](#)

[Psalm 34 or 34:1-9](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON THE FEAST OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN (TRANSFERRED), SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS CHAPEL AND THE BRICK CHURCH

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the Book of Genesis, Chapter 5, we read about a righteous man named, Enoch, who lived before the Great Flood. We don't know too much about him, except for a couple of verses that have memorialized him forever in our faith tradition. We are told, "*In all, Enoch lived for three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God, then was no more, because God took him.*" Genesis 5:23-24

In 2 Kings, the iconic prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. We are told, "*Now as [Elijah and his heir apparent, Elisha] walked on, talking as they went, a chariot of fire appeared and horses of fire coming between the two of them; and Elijah went up to heaven in the whirlwind. Elisha saw it, and shouted, 'My father! My father! Chariot of Israel and its chargers!'*" - 2 Kings 2:11-12

The Early Christians believed that Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ our Savior, also went to heaven directly upon her death. While the events surrounding the death of Mary have not been recorded in the Bible, many theologians and believers maintain that Mary's Assumption into heaven in body and soul is consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the rest of Scriptures.

So what is the Assumption?

Tradition relates that when Mary is near her death, the apostles are scattered all over the world, carrying out their apostolic ministry. At that moment, the angels fly to bring the apostles from all corners of the earth to be present beside her bier. Thomas, dubbed the doubter, again will arrive later and question the whereabouts of the Mother of God.

Christ stands behind the recumbent Mother of God and receives her soul, represented as an infant. You can see that scene on the cover of our bulletin today, in the painting of Duccio, a fourteenth-century Siennese master. With the angels and apostles surrounding Mary, Jesus the Christ, her Son and her Savior, receives her soul into everlasting life.

What a poignant image! Yet, what a hopeful image, at the same time!

Assumption means that upon our death, God will lift us up, body and soul into heaven, Mary being the first example. Now, Jesus ascended into heaven, because he is fully divine. He could propel himself heavenward, if you will. For mortals, our breath, our life, our eternal destiny all depend on God. Thus, we are “assumed” into heaven. We don’t just ascend there ourselves. In our spiritual life, we depend on God. In our prayers, we often say, “with God’s help.” How much more do we need divine assistance when we bid farewell to this life?

You may notice that our bulletin did not use the word, “Assumption.” Rather, it’s simply the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. On August 15, we have the oldest feast day for Mary. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, they use the term Dormition, meaning her falling asleep into eternal life. In the West, the term “Assumption” became popular because of its powerful implications. Some Protestant reformers had trouble with the extrabiblical nature of the Assumption. As a result, in some

quarters, this feast was totally done away with. But in the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran Church, we renamed this feast day as a day commemorating St. Mary, giving our churches the flexibility to do as much or as little as they wish.

So, what is the significance of this feast day - Assumption, Dormition, or a day to think about the Virgin Mary?

As I mentioned earlier, the beauty of this feast is that it serves as a gentle but firm reminder for us to think about our own deaths. Death, I know, is not an attractive idea. And in the Church, we focus a lot on life, on how to live a meaningful, spiritual, Christ-centered, and righteous life. We also focus a lot on eternal life. After all, perhaps the most well-known verse for all Christians is John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him, should not perish but have everlasting life.”

But the truth is, on a day to day basis, we all want to live a good life. And we all want eternal life. Yet, no one wants to die!

The Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary brings a comforting message to the time of death. Seeing or experiencing the death of a loved one, of course, is a time of great sadness. But it can also be a time of great love, a time of great spiritual strength. On a few occasions while attending to the dying and their families, I have been asked, “Can we call death ‘beautiful,’ Father?” Family members asked that because they sensed the peace, love and serenity surrounding their departed loved ones.

The Assumption shows us that the death of a righteous and faithful person can indeed be beautiful. Christ is there to receive our souls into his bosom. The apostles and angels will welcome us home. The idea here is that God will be with us and

grant us the provisions we need for that journey to eternal life. The company of the saints and angels, just like our fellow pilgrims on earth, will intercede for us and cheer us up along the way.

Perhaps, because of Mary's connection to this image, the second half of the Hail Mary prayer says, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death." May our deaths be as beautiful as Mary's! And may we, like her, be assumed, into heaven, body and soul!

And as we await this time here on earth, before Christ receives our souls back to his bosom, let the words of Mary's *Magnificat* resound in our worship and devotion daily,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.."*

When our souls serve to make the Name of the Lord known, we will indeed be living the Gospel truth crystallized in a prayer of St. Francis - for *it is giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Amen.