

“What Is Real?”

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

“But how would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” (Morpheus from “The Matrix”). The song of Mary invites us to escape a world of illusion and see the truth clearly, for the very first time.

In the early 21st century, a war broke out between humans and intelligent machines. After human beings prevented the machines from getting access to solar energy, the machines responded by capturing humans and using their bodies to provide bioelectric power. The machines didn’t kill the humans, but they pacified them — creating a simulated reality called The Matrix.

“The Matrix is the world that has been pulled over your eyes,” says a character named Morpheus, “to blind you from the truth.” Sound familiar?

The human battle with the Matrix has played out over the course of three movies, the first released in 1999 and the second and third in 2003. Now, a fourth Matrix movie is scheduled to open in theaters on December 22, this week, with simultaneous release on HBO Max. The film industry is hoping for a Christmas blockbuster.

The Matrix is a land of illusion, as well as a place of really cool, slow-motion, science-fiction shoot-outs. “Wake up, Neo,” says Morpheus to the star of the movie, played by Keanu Reeves. “As long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free.” This Morpheus says, “as long as facebook exists, the human race will never be free.

Neo is a computer hacker whose real name is Thomas Anderson. He senses that something is wrong with the world, so he goes on a search for the truth. His love interest is Trinity, a woman who has been freed by Morpheus to do battle with the Matrix.

Neo. Thomas Anderson. Trinity. All three names have clear connections to the Christian faith.

Throughout the Matrix movies, Neo is referred to as “the One.” He is the chosen one, the Christ, the messiah, the one who is sent to save his people. The name Neo means “new,” a name that also connects to Jesus, the new man who leads us to new life.

But there’s more. Neo’s real name, Thomas Anderson, contains additional Christian meanings. “Anderson” literally means “Son of Man,” a phrase often used in the Bible to describe Jesus. The first name “Thomas” reminds us of the disciple Thomas, who wouldn’t believe in the resurrection until he saw the truth with his own eyes.

“Wake up, Neo,” says Morpheus. Wake up, Thomas Anderson. See the truth with your own eyes.

The character Trinity makes us think of God, of course: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Neo and Trinity fall in love, showing the same powerful love that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Together, they are on a mission to save the world.

This week, we are all invited to enter the Matrix.

But don’t feel that you must go to the movies to do this. This invitation is connected more to Mary’s song of praise than it is to a science-fiction film.

To “enter the Matrix” is to see the truth clearly, for the very first time.

Mary's adventure begins when she leaves Nazareth in Galilee and goes with haste to a Judean town in the hill country. She has just received a message from a mysterious visitor — not Morpheus, but the angel Gabriel. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” said Gabriel, “and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Mary will be the mother of Neo, the One — Son of Man and Son of God.

Gabriel knows that his message is hard to accept, so he offers an illustration of how nothing will be impossible with God. He tells Mary that her relative Elizabeth has conceived a son, even though she was thought to be too old to have children. So, Mary travels from Galilee to Judea and enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, her child leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth cries out, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (v. 42).

Clearly, God is working in some surprising and powerful ways. Elizabeth's baby senses the presence of Mary's baby, and he shows his happiness by leaping for joy. Both women discover the truth of what God is doing in their lives.

In “The Matrix,” Morpheus says to Neo, “Free your mind.” God was saying the same to Elizabeth and Mary: “Free your mind and believe that I am doing amazing things through you.”

Then Mary offers a song of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant” (vv. 46-48). Mary knows that the Matrix is the world that has been pulled over our eyes, to blind us from the truth. The Matrix says that a teenage girl is in a low position, a bottom rank, an unimpressive place.

But Mary enters the Matrix and blows it apart, discovering that the truth of the matter is that God has looked on her with favor, allowing her to be the mother of God's Son.

God looked with favor on Mary, and God looks with favor on us. The surprising truth of our faith is that God favors us, even though we have done nothing to deserve this approval and support.

When God favors us, God is offering us the gift of grace. Episcopal priest Justin Holcomb says that "grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely; the peace of God given to the restless; the unmerited favor of God."

Unmerited favor: That's what God shows us. We don't earn it or deserve it. All we can do is accept it. When we enter the Matrix and blow it apart, we discover the amazing truth that God looks with favor on us, and freely offers us forgiveness, love, and peace.

"We live in a world of earning, deserving, and merit, and these result in judgment," says Holcomb. But this world is really an illusion. The truth is that God is acting to replace judgment with grace, and the result is new life. As long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free. But when we destroy this illusion, we will all be forgiven and freed.

God has looked with favor on us. That's the truth of our faith, beyond a world of illusion.

Mary goes on to say that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (vv. 52-55).

In the world around us, the world of illusion, the powerful stay on their thrones and keep the lowly in their place. The hungry scrounge for food, and the rich have leftovers that go bad in

their refrigerators. But Mary shatters this Matrix and praises God for turning the world upside-down, with God bringing down the powerful, lifting up those in need, feeding the hungry, and sending the rich away with nothing.

“But how would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” That’s a question asked by Morpheus in “The Matrix,” and it’s an important question for us to answer today. How do we know that the world around us is an illusion, and the world of God is real?

We know that God’s world is real because the birth of Jesus was real. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” said John. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). The Divine Word that was part of the creation of the universe took human form and lived among us as Jesus. This Word became real, in the form of a real human being.

As Christians, we call this “the Incarnation” — God coming to us in human flesh. “It is untheological,” says Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner. “It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are.”

Yes, the Incarnation is the way things are. It is real. And it is what we will celebrate at Christmas. Buechner goes on to say that “incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it.”

The birth of Jesus at Christmas is the victory of God over the illusions we see all around us. God really has “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” (Luke 1:51). God is always on the side of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and comforting the afflicted.

So, let's join Mary in entering the Matrix and blowing it to pieces. More powerful than the Trinity character who will be appearing in the movies, Mary can point us to a truth that can change our lives for the better. Mary tells us that God looks with favor on us, lifts up the lowly, and brings down the powerful.

That's the real world, beyond the illusions that we see all around us. And we know it is real because God has come to us in a baby named Jesus, full of grace and truth.

May the peace of God . . .

#251 – My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness