

“Mary, Mary, Quite the Contrary”

Luke 1:26-38

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I have always looked forward to this Sunday in Advent when our thoughts have clearly turned from the prophesy of the ancient prophets to the birth of Jesus. The last candle we lit today recognizes Mary. So, whenever possible, I dedicate this Advent Sunday to retelling her story for all of us to recall.

Our familiar Christmas recollection seems to make a giant leap from the instant of the angel’s annunciation to the moment of Christ’s birth to Mary. But the truth is, the birth of Christ developed over an extended period, as much as year. In her daily routine there were two to three meals a day to prepare, hard work in home and village, conversations, new acquaintances, travel here and yon, words spoken about days of yore and days to come. She must have shared with other women dreams of hope in a dreary world where a stringent class system as well as specific gender roles were normal expectations within her society. It was a year when Jews sneaked around in the glooms of a heavy-handed, Pax-obsessed Rome where some religion tolerated today could just as well in a momentary decree be a religion prohibited forever. It was a year when seasons passed with planting and harvest. Oh, yes, and we mustn’t forget her responsibilities to Joseph either. There were rules and expectations of the “good wife.” Though that year she was a mother with child though not a mother with a husband. All the while in the inner warm place where little children come to be known there was Jesus the Christ, week by week maturing to just the right time for his birth in Bethlehem.

To say that Mary was an average Palestinian young woman is one way to put it, but her spirituality was not commonplace, at least we believe that is true from what Gabriel says. Favored among women, the angel said. God favored her in such an unexpected, extraordinary way. So, here is the tension that her stories bring to us—ordinary but extraordinary at the same time. Except that, in God’s way of doing things, as C.S. Lewis put it, miracles are just God’s ordinary. So, this sermon benefits us to reflect on Mary, the mother of Jesus: a humble, poor, gentle, good, ordinary young Jewish woman, and on the contrary, a divinely favored, virtuous, willing servant, whom God trusted with the salvation of all God’s children throughout the ages. Besides, think about this. Except for Jesus, Peter, James, John, and Paul, of all the other characters mentioned in the New Testament we know more about Mary. She’s in the top five need-to-know

personages in the history of the first century church. So, there may be more to the story than we've thought about lately.

Mary was born likely born in Nazareth in Galilee about 3744 in the Jewish calendar (18 B.C.). Her given name was Miriam, which we have come to know as Mary. She was betrothed to Joseph when she was twelve in the Jewish year 3758 (4 B.C.) but we don't know exactly how long it was until she married Joseph.

People that have read the New Testament know her husband Joseph, her relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth. We also know the Magnificat, the song she sang at the annunciation. The gospels tell us she traveled from Galilee to the hill country and to Bethlehem. We have a narrative about her journey to Egypt to protect the toddler Jesus. We know that she and her husband visited the temple where baby boy Jesus was dedicated when Jesus was 12 years old. She walked from Nazareth to Capernaum carrying her children with her to visit Jesus. And we know she was at the crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem.¹

There is evidence to suggest that she was from a very poor family. Mary's annunciation comes from the heart of a woman whose lowliness we too often regard as humility when in fact the word means more like impoverished. Mary's voice came from among her people who lived with just barely enough to get by. As one person put it--Mary is poor -- dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she sings! Why? Because Luke knows -- from the vantage point of the end of the birth, life, death and resurrection -- that this lowly one, . . . this woman is the one God chooses for God's work that was so contrary to the way things were usually done. Mary, despised and rejected, is favored by God and will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings. (James F. Fay, *Christian Century*) There is an additional story we have about when Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord.

According to Levitical law, Mary and Joseph made an offering of two turtledoves (Lk 2:22-24). This *may* be an indicator of Mary's and Joseph's social class. Luke is quoting a passage in the Book of Leviticus about offerings a mother should present after having a son. The default offering is a one-year-old lamb and a single turtledove. But if the mother can't afford a lamb, another turtledove (or pigeon) would do (Lev 12:8). We can gather from that story that Mary couldn't afford a lamb. One interesting thing to note: in the book of Leviticus, the second turtledove is a "sin offering," a sacrifice specifically made to seek forgiveness and cleansing from sin. You can read all about these in Leviticus 4-6.²

¹ <http://www.documentarytube.com/articles/8-facts-you-need-to-know-about-virgin-mary>

² <https://overviewbible.com/virgin-mary-facts/>

“In Mary’s famous song of praise, we find evidence that Mary knew the Old Testament teachings [about the coming Messiah]. As a Jew, she had been learning about biblical prophecy her entire life, well for fourteen years anyway. Her song also bears a striking resemblance to Hannah’s famous prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Now, she would become part of the fulfillment of God’s ultimate plan. *“He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever”* (Luke 1:54-55).

Mary understood the magnitude of her decision to say yes when God chose her. Her knowledge of God’s promise to send a Savior for His people showed through her worship.”³ Imagine how she knew this in an age when a young woman might not have access to the ancient texts in the same way men in a synagogue may have been.

What Mary couldn’t have known, she came to know in ways not too farfetched from the way we find our own meaning in life. We choose to believe that the events of our lives are not just happenstance, but clear and present spiritual expressions of divine intervention and providence.

Yes. We do tend to roll right on by Mary’s experiences from annunciation to Christ’s birth, rarely stopping to imagine how Mary might have been preoccupied during that several months of waiting. Whether she was able to wait well or not, we do not know. Was she impatient at times? Did she have morning sickness? Was she so tired some nights she dropped onto her bed and fell instantly asleep? Wasn’t her waiting problematic given the nature of her pregnancy, her espousal to Joseph, and her trip away from home for three months? Isn’t it normal not to know everything at first, even when we think we do? Sometimes the more we know the easier it is to wait. But there are times, when knowing what may happen next makes it more difficult to wait?

For the twelve days of Christmas we will re-imagine the star in the east, the angels, and the shepherds. We will rejoice in the hope of the Christ child. We will try to hear Mary’s sweet voice among all the others we will hear. We will try not to let the affluence around us blind us to the realities of the lowly in our world whose hands are stretched out for a simple piece of bread.

Mary was quite the contrary in so many ways. It would be nice if we had more of her story, but we don’t. May the parts of the story we do have enrich your faith by the unusual nature of its connection to God’s history of salvation for us all.

³ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/3-things-you-didn-t-know-about-mary-mother-of-jesus-in-the-bible.html>