

Mary, Full of Grace

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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Luke 1:26–56 (Common English Bible)

²⁶ When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" ²⁹ She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. ³¹ Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³ He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. ³⁶ Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God."

³⁸ Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³ Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

⁴⁶ Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the
Lord!

⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am
I rejoice in God my savior.

⁴⁸ He has looked with favor
on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone
will consider me highly
favored

⁴⁹ because the mighty one
has done great things for
me.

Holy is his name.

⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the
next,
who honors him as God.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant
thoughts and proud inclinations.

⁵² He has pulled the powerful
down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry
with good things
and sent the rich away empty-
handed.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid
of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵ just as he promised to our
ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's
descendants forever."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

Mary, full of grace and favored by God, becomes the God-bearer.

This week, we again hop into Mary's time machine, going back past even Jesus' birth, to the day when an angel came to Mary and her subsequent visit to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Perhaps in these stories, we will get a better understanding of why Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of the Christ.

A shocking announcement

On just a regular sort of day, Mary, a young Galilean woman, hardly more than a girl, was visited by an angel, Gabriel, no less. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph, which was tantamount to marriage even before the consummation

of the union. Thus, her engagement to Joseph was completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I'd guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel's greeting might mean for her. Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her.

Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the "Son of the Most High" who will sit on David's throne. Mary's reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! How could she possibly explain a pregnancy? What would everyone assume, even Joseph? Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The words "come over" (v. 35) translate the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God's holy presence, as in the cloud that "covered" the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all. Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children.

I'm sure that Mary must have found all this too much to comprehend. But Gabriel reminds Mary that "nothing will be impossible with God." Notice that Gabriel uses the future tense, echoing Jesus' later declaration, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn't visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God's story to move forward.

The Incarnation

Our word "incarnate" comes from a Latin word meaning "be made flesh." ("Carnivorous" is based on the same Latin root.) Thus, when we refer to the incarnation or to "God incarnate," we are referring to "God made flesh" . . . God becoming human.

The early church had a word they used to describe Mary that is helpful here: *theotokos*, "the one who gave birth to the one who is Christ. We sometimes think that the point of the Virgin Birth is to emphasize Jesus' divinity. It is not. The early church embraced the teachings about the Virgin Birth because it emphasized Jesus' humanity! An early Christian heretic named Marcion very much believed that Jesus was God. But he couldn't bring himself to see Jesus as truly human, saying, "Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes." All the messiness of childbirth was too much for Marcion. But that very messiness drives home our proclamation that God has experienced life as we experience it. He has celebrated as we celebrate, suffered as we suffer, and perhaps most astounding of all, God has shared in our fears.

Mary is also told that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshua (Joshua), meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

The name, Yeshua, was a very ordinary name in Jesus' day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called "the Son of the Most High," a striking title, and that he will sit on David's throne, where he will reign over God's people (the "House of Jacob") forever. Indeed, Jesus' "kingdom will have no end." All this is in keeping with promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

I would imagine that all this was quite frightful for Mary. There's a reason that the first words out of almost every Angel's mouth in the Bible are "Don't be afraid." Fear tested Mary's faith and fears test our

faith. The question is whether we will hold tight to God and to our confidence that we are his, the sheep of his pasture. Faith is no guarantee of an easy or worry-free life; God has made us no such promise. But it *is* faith for which we have been made, a people created in God's image who are to know God and enjoy God forever. And it is in the lived faith of disciples that we can find the peace that passes all understanding and the confidence that one day God's mercy, justice, and healing will transform our world and each of us. Let us be more like Mary, who in the face of frightful perplexity, simply said, "Let it be with me just as you have said." (Luke 1:38). No more faith-filled words are spoken in all the Bible.

Mary visits Elizabeth

So, sometime thereafter Mary went to visit Elizabeth in her home. One woman is old, but now pregnant long after giving up hope (see Luke's opening story in his gospel). The other is young and unmarried, but now pregnant and carrying the hope of Israel. Joy floods the room. At the mere sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. Elizabeth herself is nearly overcome with the power of it all . . . she knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord. This story invites us to look back on our own lives and find those moments when we were flooded by joy and excitement that seemed to overwhelm, that seemed impossible to contain. Surely, Elizabeth and Mary experience that and more. Mary is so thrilled, so excited, that she breaks out into verse (v. 46-55).

Mary's Song

As you may know, Patti and I recently returned from a trip to Israel, where we spent ten amazing days with more than ninety members of the St. Andrew family. On the last day of our trip, we visited the village of Ein-Kerem in the Judean hills east of Jerusalem. In Christian tradition, this village was the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Thus, it is remembered as the place where Mary visited Elizabeth. One of the town's landmarks is even known as Mary's Spring. High on the slopes of Ein-Kerem sit two churches, both known as the Church of St. John the Baptist. One is Orthodox and the other is Roman Catholic. We visited the Roman Catholic church. Outside on a long wall, are nearly 60 ceramic plaques, each from around the world in various languages. Each plaque has the words of Mary's song. It was a very moving sight – indeed, across the world we are one in Christ Jesus!

These verses from Mary tell us all we really need to know about the vocation that will be given her unborn child. Fred Craddock notes that there are a couple of things about Mary's song that deserve special attention:

- God is praised in terms of what he has already done. All the verbs dealing with the establishment of justice and mercy are past tense. Recall that the promises from Isaiah about a child being born, a Son given, were all in present tense. As Craddock puts it, "the language expresses what is timelessly true: past, present, and future without differentiation."¹ It is a way of expressing confidence in God and the certainty of his promises. Mary knows that God's promises are as good as done!
- Verses 52 & 53 are the most intense images in the song. They are a classic statement of God's purposes. God turns the world upside down. He brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak. He feeds the hungry and sends away the rich. Though these can be hard words for us to hear, compare them to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). From his first choosing of Israel, God had always been the protector of the weak and the champion of the oppressed, and he expected no less from his own people. Mary was oppressed (a woman in a patriarchal culture) and poor and inconsequential – she knew that she needed a Savior (v. 47). The difficulty for the rich and powerful has always been that their seeming self-sufficiency blinds them to their own need for a Savior. Unless we recognize and embrace our need to be saved, the Christmas proclamation will never be anything more to us than a nice story about a pregnant teenager, a baby in a manger, and some gift-giving.

¹from Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1990.

We celebrate Advent and Christmas each year because ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph obeyed God. Each of these ordinary people points us to the miracle of the incarnation, that the Lord God Almighty embraced the ordinariness of human flesh so that we might get new hearts. A baby born in a manger to a couple of “nobodies.” This is God’s way. This is Mary’s song, known as the “Magnificat.” The powerful are brought low and the weak are lifted up. God’s way is the way of Mary, not of Herod. Of Joseph, not of Caesar. It sounded bizarre then and, truth be told, it sounds bizarre now if we will listen well. It is not the mighty who save us, it is the baby.

In the end, Mary is the Serene Contradiction

Kathleen Norris speaks of Mary as a “serene contradiction.” Norris writes, “I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are supposed to believe about her. And she doesn't make it easy. . . . The point about Mary is that she is [many] things, and more, always more. She is poor yet gloriously rich. She is blessed among women yet condemned to witness her son's execution. She is human yet God-bearer, and the Word that she willingly bears is destined to pierce her soul. Had we a more elastic imagination, we might be less troubled by Mary's air of serene contradiction.”²

Perhaps the place for us (for me!) to begin recovering our appreciation of Mary is to see in her a magnificent model of total trustful devotion to God. When an angel comes to her, announcing that God has chosen her, Mary’s reply is simple: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me . . .” (Luke 1:38). Mary responds to God with trusting obedience, knowing the “real-world” consequences of an unmarried pregnancy. Her devotion to her son would endure all the way to his crucifixion and death. Mary at the cross is a woman free of any concerns about doctrine or contradictions. Instead, there is only Mary’s steadfast, enduring love of Jesus. Christ may have been abandoned, even by Peter, but Mary stayed true. The faith of all was preserved in this one person, this Blessed Mother.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What happens to young Mary is so familiar to us that we can be blind to the deep fear and uncertainty that must have threatened to drown her. Yet, she responds to Gabriel with peace and confidence in God and God’s way forward. You might spend a few minutes compiling a portrait of Mary. Feel free to use your biblically-informed imagination in this. In what ways could we be more like Mary? How would we begin such a transformation?
2. Can you even imagine the sheer joy that must have been running through Elizabeth and Mary? What are some joyful stories of your own life? What have been the most joy-filled times in your life? I remember that when my first son was born I felt like I was electrified. It seemed like one of those out-of-the-body experiences. I simply remember being joyful in every part of my being. Discuss what these joyful experiences have in common. How might they point us toward God?
3. Luke tells us that Mary was “favored” by God. But Alan Culpepper points out that being favored meant that Mary would become pregnant and bear a child out of wedlock – a child destined to die a shameful and horrible death on a Roman cross. You can bet that many of Mary’s townspeople weren’t very understanding of her condition! I suspect that God’s favor towards us might not always conform to what we think favor ought to look like. Mary was called to be obedient and she obeyed. We are called to be obedient. Do we obey? Do we see the power that lies in being obedient to God? Does our obedience ever cost us anything? Do we think that God’s favor – God’s grace! – comes cheaply?

²from “The Serene Contradiction of the Mother of Jesus.” This is Norris’ foreword to *The Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* by Gaventa and Rigby.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 Hannah's story and song</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 80:1-7,17-19 This is a plea to God for salvation. From what do you need saving?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 God's promise of a new day.</p>	<p>Thursday, Luke 1:1-25 God comes to a priest named Zechariah, who will become the father of John the Baptist.</p>
<p>Friday, Luke 1:77-80 After the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah prophesies. Compare this to Mary's song (the Magnificat).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

