

Mary's Boy

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Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

As most Knollwood regulars know, my mom died recently. Because of that, I've found myself drawn to Mary more than usual this Christmas. I've found myself wondering how Jesus' mama helped make him the person he was.

In the nativities we erect at home and church, the baby Jesus is the star. But in the Bible's story of Christmas, there is far more about Mary than Jesus. Matthew and Luke remember what we are prone to forget: that without Mary, there would have been no baby Jesus. I would go farther and say, without Mary there would have been no Lord Jesus either. Mary was instrumental in forming Jesus in ways no one else was.

When I was a boy, my mother always told me the story of my birth on my birthday. She told how the labor pains took her breath away and that *her* daddy had to rush her to the hospital because *my* daddy was working at the plant.

But later, all that anxiety and anguish turned to joy as she stared in wonder at the pink, fleshy face of her baby boy: *Me!*

Who do you suppose first told Jesus the shocking, scandalous story of his own birth? Who told him the improbable tale of the Holy Spirit breathing new life into a virgin's womb? Who was

the source of the nativity stories that first he, and later we, would treasure?

During the children's time one Christmas, the pastor invited the children to gather around a large nativity. He told the story about the angels first announcing the birth of the baby Jesus to the shepherds.

Summing up, the pastor asked, "So who was the first to know Jesus was born?"

There was a heartbeat of silence. Then one timid little girl answered "Mary?"

Yes, Mary was the first to know. But she wasn't just a willing recipient of the angel Gabriel's news. She also helped to shape the miracle and write the story we call "Christmas."

The first gift Mary gave Jesus was a thoughtful faith. Mary was probably 13-15 years of age at the time of the angel's visitation. And like so many of Knollwood's own bright, thoughtful teenagers, she was already an independent thinker. Notice her first question upon learning she was to be a mother without the benefit of a male partner, was "*How can this be?*" That is not a question a gullible, easily manipulated young woman would ask, especially of an imposing angelic presence.

And no sooner than Gabriel disappeared in a burst of stardust, than Mary took off for the hill country of Judah. She "made haste," Luke's gospel tells us, to see if her aged Aunt Elizabeth was indeed pregnant, as the angel said. Mary knew if that unlikely pronouncement proved true, then maybe her mind wasn't playing tricks on her, after all.

Some days later, when the young Mary and Elizabeth met, Mary's eyes grew wide at the sight of the older woman's bulging belly. Then Elizabeth's child-to-be, gave her a good, stout kick from within, awakening her to the bold new truth, now standing before her. "Blessed are you among women!" she exclaimed. "And blessed is the fruit of your womb. How wonderful that the mother of my Lord comes to me!"

And that's when Mary knew. That's when, in her heart of hearts, she knew: God was birthing a whole new world, starting with her.

The poet, Denise Levertov, powerfully describes the moment of Mary's consent to the

miracle beckoning her.

“This was the minute no one speaks of, when she could still refuse. A breath unbreathed, spirit, suspended, waiting.

“She did not cry, ‘I cannot, I am not worthy,’ nor, ‘I have not the strength.’” She did not submit with gritted teeth, raging, coerced.

“Bravest of all humans, consent illumined her. The room filled with its light, the lily glowed in it, and the iridescent wings. Consent, courage unparalleled, opened her utterly.

No, Mary was not the simple, unquestioning maiden, so often portrayed in Christian piety. She was an independent, thoughtful woman.

And once she corroborated the angel’s message, she burst into song. But this was not a sweet sentimental Christmas lullaby. This was a visceral, subversive song in which Mary waxes theological about God’s justice and love breaking into the world: “For the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name. (The Lord) has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

One of the things I loved about my mother was that she never shamed me for my questions, theological or otherwise. She taught me I was to love God with my mind, as well as my heart and soul and strength. And I have no doubt the same was true for Jesus, raised as he was by a feisty, thoughtful, feminist theologian like Mary.

When Jesus burst on the scene, some thirty years later, he was among other things a smart, sassy rabbi who could quote the Bible with the best of ‘em, while pressing home the deeper truths of God’s word. He regularly bested his opponents in theological dustups until, says the gospels, “None of them dared ask him any more questions!” (Mark 12:34 and parallels). In that, as in so many other ways, Jesus did his mama Mary proud.

Mary also shaped and formed Jesus into the remarkable person he was by teaching him a kind, compassionate faith. From the beginning, she both proclaimed and embodied God’s love for the little people, the weak and the lowly, the exposed and the vulnerable.

After all, Mary was a nobody from a podunk town in the hills. And her baby was to be born in a stable situated in a wide place in the road called “Bethlehem,” a place even the prophet Micah derided as being from “one of the *little* clans of Judah” (Micah 5:2). Little wonder, Mary marveled that “the Lord has looked with favor on the *lowliness* of his servant.”

But then, from that very realization, Mary launches into a song known as the *Magnificat*, from the first word in the Latin text, “My soul *magnifies* the Lord.” To magnify is to “make big.” In stirring words and song, Mary “makes big” God’s work in the world, especially in all the places lesser eyes are apt to miss: Like God’s love of the poor, “filling the hungry with good things” and in God’s opposition to the proud and powerful who care only about themselves.

This week, our nation has been on an unsettling roller coaster ride. The stock market is going bust, geopolitical realities are shifting in dangerous ways, and a government shut-down is looming. Like Joseph and a very pregnant Mary, forced on a precarious journey by an emperor’s decrees, we have been plunged into fear and uncertainty by the whims of our leaders.

And yet Mary’s song reminds us, as it first reminded her and Elizabeth--and maybe the angels listening in--that God is at work in the world in ways that don’t show up in the GNP or Dow Jones Industrial Average. For God is at work in faithful women and men. Who praise and trust the “mighty one who is doing great things.” Far from the corridors of power: among shepherds in the field, and poor, pregnant women, singing their songs, and in a baby in a manger.

In an online journal, my friend Buddy Shurden mused about the difference in songs and decrees in the story of Christmas. The decrees are issued by the people in power. Caesar’s decree sends his minions scurrying, managing their census, and the little people scampering across Palestine in search of their ancestral homes.

By contrast, the songs are sung by the angels, and Mary, and Elizabeth, and are heard by peasants and shepherds. And it is the *songs* that announce the divine reversal at the heart of God’s kingdom, where the people who think they are in charge, discover they are not. And the people, who think they don’t matter, discover they do.

I saw this kingdom value at work in my mother's care for the outsider, be that a family member with special challenges or a friend nobody but her seemed to want around. This week, I received a two-page, single-space letter from one such troubled soul who expressed how profoundly my mother challenged and changed her life.

I shared the letter with my two sisters and my niece, which produced a flurry of emails. Said one, "You know how Mamaw was: she always took care of the ones who needed some compassion and a friend, the ones, like all the rest of us, with a lot of baggage and weirdness inside."

Said another, "I didn't realize until now how many people she touched. The world has lost a light of love but the universe has gained a star" In my mom's concern for those our Lord called, "the least of these, my brothers and sisters," she reminded me of Jesus.

Mary gave Jesus a thoughtful faith, a kind, compassionate faith, and a living faith. The gift of a living faith, like the stirring of new life in a virgin's womb, is the work of the Holy Spirit. According to Luke's gospel, the Holy Spirit *overshadowed* Mary, like the cloud of God's glory *overshadowed* the tabernacle in the wilderness (it's the same word in the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament). And there, safe in the cocoon of God's love, a miracle of metamorphosis unfolded within her.

And when Elizabeth greets Mary and the baby in her womb leaps for joy, Elizabeth is also "filled with the Holy Spirit."

Later, her boy-child, John the Baptist, will prophesy about the Coming One who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Mary bequeathed the fire of the Holy Spirit that first flared in her womb and heart, to Jesus. And he in turn breathed that Spirit life to others through his life, death, and resurrection. So today, the same Lord Jesus, first born in Bethlehem's manger, can be born in us.

Author Sue Monk Kidd writes about attending an Advent retreat at a monastery. One morning, she greeted a monk with the words, "Merry Christmas," to which he responded, "May Christ be born in you."

Reflecting on the encounter, Kidd rightly notes there is a world of difference in having a "Merry Christmas" and "Letting Christ be born in you."

That was perhaps my mother's greatest legacy to me: a living faith in a living Lord. To her, Jesus wasn't just a great teacher or inspiring martyr, long gone. He was the church's risen Lord and her most intimate companion.

Mom was the living embodiment of the old gospel hymn, "And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own." Thank God, her faith was contagious. And I caught it!

When my mom lay dying in the hospital, I spent a hard day at her side, watching her suffer. Finally, overwhelmed by my helplessness, I said more for my sake than hers, "Don't you wish Jesus would show up in the flesh and make you well?"

She paused to ponder the question. Then she swallowed hard, smiled faintly, and said, "It's enough that he's here with me now."

Through the Holy Spirit's power to birth new life, Mary bequeathed a living faith to Jesus. And through the Holy Spirit's power to birth new life, my mother bequeathed a living faith to me. And by God's grace, it's a miracle that keeps happening.

Which is why for me, the most heart-stopping moment in that glorious Christmas music last Sunday, was when all those beautiful children stood on these steps, and sweetly sang their prayer and mine: "Stay with us, Lord Jesus, stay with us. Stay with us, it soon is evening. Stay with us, Lord Jesus, stay with us, it soon is evening and night is falling."

Yes, this year, more than most, I'm thankful for Mary for she gave Jesus a thoughtful faith, a kind, compassionate faith, and a living faith.

And as he would be the first to tell us, Jesus wasn't just God's boy. He was Mary's boy too.

Eternal God, you dared not send your Son into the world without an able, loving mother to shape and nurture him. So this Christmas, we thank you for Mary.

And if we were blessed to have a mother like her, who became a living embodiment of love for us, then we thank you for our mothers too.

In the name of your boy, and Mary's boy too, we pray. Amen.