

There's Something about Mary

A Prep Guide for Session 2

Just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.

Plutarch, *Alexander* 1.1

The character and mettle of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has captured faithful imagination and admiration from the earliest days. Three canonical Gospels and the Book of Acts name her in their chronicles of Jesus and the early church. She features even more prominently in the second and third century Gospel of Mary Magdalene, Gospel of Philip, and Infancy Gospel of Thomas. By 325 A.D. Mary's name appears in the historic Nicene Creed, where Jesus is "incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary". Twenty centuries of Christianity testify that there is something about Mary!

Granting the incredible legacy of Mary through the twenty centuries since her birth, our specific focus on Thursday will be Luke's characterization of Mary from the several brief episodes and one extended prayer that we have in his Gospel and the Book of Acts. We'll read and interpret our author's picture of her within its ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman environment. Then we'll ask ourselves what Mary's life and character might mean for our own walk.

The materials in this prep guide are intended to give context to that Thursday evening lecture and discussion. Enjoy!

MARY IN THE BIBLE

Mary in Luke -Acts

To prepare for Thursday evening, you will profit most from reading all of Luke's Mary mentions. Here's a list:

Luke 1.26-38	The Angel Gabriel and Mary
Luke 1.27-39-45	Mary with Elizabeth
Luke 1.46-56	Mary's Prayer (Compare Hannah's Prayer in 1 Samuel 2.1-10)

Luke 2.1-7	Jesus's Birth
Luke 2.16-20	Adoration of the Babe
Luke 2.21	Circumcision on the 8th Day
Luke 2.22-24	The Pauper's Sacrifice (Compare Leviticus 12.8)
Luke 2.33-35	Simeon's Words to Mary
Luke 2.39-40	Return to Nazareth
Luke 2.41-52	Mary and Joseph's Worries about Jesus at age 12 in the Temple
Luke 8.19-21	Mary and Jesus's Brothers Can't Reach Jesus through a Crowd
Luke 11.27-28	Acclaim for Mary and Jesus's Response
Acts 1.14	Mary in the Upper Room awaiting Pentecost

As you read, consider what sort of character Luke pictures in the mother of Jesus.

LUKE'S REPORT OF JESUS'S BIRTH IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

We will spend a few minutes on Thursday evening setting the Jewish and Greco - Roman contexts for the way Luke presents Mary and Jesus's birth. These are offered strictly to set a wider historical framework for the biblical texts that will be our primary focus.

Greco-Roman Parallels to the Virgin Birth

Special and miraculous births were often attached later to the biographies of great men in Greece and Rome. Here are two examples among the many.

Plato the Greek Philosopher (5th Century B.C.E.)

"Speusippus in the work entitled 'Plato's Funeral Feast', Clearchus in his Encomium on Plato, and Anaxilaïdes in his second book On Philosophers, tell us that there was a story at Athens that Ariston made violent love to Perictione, then in her bloom, and failed to win her; and that, when he ceased to offer violence, Apollo appeared to him in a dream, whereupon he left her unmolested until her child was born." (Diogenes Laertes 3.2)

Alexander the Great (4th Century B.C.E.)

"The night before that on which the marriage was consummated, the bride [Olympias] dreamed that there was a peal of thunder and that a thunder bolt fell upon her womb, and that thereby much fire was kindled, which broke into flames that travelled all about, and then was extinguished." (Plutarch, Alexander 1.2)

Caesar Augustus (1st Century B.C.E.)

“When [Augustus’ mother] Atia had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. On a sudden a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away. When she awoke, she purified herself, as if after the embraces of her husband, and at once there appeared on her body a mark in colors like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it; so that presently she ceased ever to go to the public baths. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo.” (Suetonius “Twelve Caesars,” Augustus 94:4)

A Greek Critic of Early Christianity

Jesus had come from a village in Judea, and was the son of a poor Jewess who gained her living by the work of her own hands. His mother had been turned out of doors by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, on being convicted of adultery [with a soldier named Panthera (i.32)]. (Celsus, *The True Word*, 150-200 C.E.)

Jewish Critics

Jewish rabbis also expressed suspicions about Jesus’s conception. Collections in the four centuries after Jesus’ birth call him “Yeshu son of Panthera” a Roman soldier. Here’s one scholar’s summary:

“We have two stories preserved in supplements to the Mishnah called the Tosefta (as well as in other parallel rabbinic texts but primarily see Tosefta Chullin 2:22 – 24) that refer to “Yeshu ben Pantera” (with alternate spelling variations). The first involves the famous Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century AD. Rabbi Eliezer relates a teaching in the “name of Yeshu ben Pantera” that he heard on the streets of Sepphoris from one Jacob of Kefar Sakhnin. Eliezer himself had been arrested for “heresy” and some have suspected he might have been sympathetic to the Nazarenes. The second story also involves Jacob of Kefar Sakhnin who attempts to heal a certain Rabbi Eleazar ben Dama of a snakebite in the name of “Yeshu ben Pantera .”” (Dr. John Tabor [Blog](#))

A FINAL WORD

Luke gives us privileged access to the remarkable story of a teenage woman who finds herself at the center of the universe. Thursday evening will offer us a splendid chance to ponder together the character and significance of Mary of Nazareth as a part of our collective walk to Bethlehem.

A Devotional Reflection on Mother Mary

Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel Gabriel answered Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God...For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1.26-38)

What do you imagine the immortal, invisible, only wise God does while you and I are deciding what we'll do? This sounds a bit flippant. Classic theologians might use a ten-dollar word to characterize my question as anthropomorphizing — imagining God in too-human terms. And I get it. But human terms are really all we have. So...what do you think God does while we're deciding what we'll do? Is there a suspenseful soundtrack or Jeopardy music? Does all of heaven lean earthward and wait?

You know the moment I mean. In the famous words of Victor Frankl, the brilliant 20th -century Austrian neurologist -psychologist-philosopher, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Here are a few examples of the space Frankl describes:

- ❖ A car cuts in and won't let you merge onto the freeway. Stimulus. Do you swear and honk or proceed silently? What will be your response?
- ❖ Someone near you speaks a dehumanizing joke about another human being. Stimulus. Do you laugh or stay silent or defend the slandered? What will be your response?

- ❖ A friendship has gone on the rocks because you both feel like the other is at fault. The silence is deafening. Stimulus. Will you hold a grudge or open lines of communication? What will be your response?

The question I asked above should make more sense now: what is God thinking in this space between, while we do or don't respond?

Maybe the drama is more available to us in the famous scene today's passage paints. How would Mary of Nazareth, a poor teenage girl from a poor family, answer the angel, Gabriel? In the Bible, angels always frighten people at first, so their first words are usually designed to disarm. The angel says, "Fear not!" but his message for Mary turns out to be as alarming as his presence: "The God who created and sustains the universe, wants to do new and amazing things on earth, and those amazing things just happen to start with you – young and unmarried – having a baby."

Start the Jeopardy music, right? Rarely do our Gospels give us access to the inner musings of the characters, but here we get to hear what's in Mary's head. She's confounded. "How can this be?!" she contends. "I'm a virgin!" But she listens to Gabriel's answer, and in the end she owns the space between stimulus and response. She assures the angel: "I'm in!" But her words are more beautiful than those: "Here am I," says Mary, "the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Stimulus. Deliberation. Response.

Here's where I imagine all heaven roaring. I picture the elation of a sweaty-palmed suitor who has just popped the question. I imagine God shouting gleefully: "She said yes!" After all, the child of this angel announced would one day give us a glimpse of how our decisions reverberate, when he pictures a shepherd finding his lost sheep, a woman finally spotting her lost coin, and a lost boy coming home to dad. "There's more joy in heaven..." says Jesus, and joy in heaven sounds like a good thing for us to cause.

Today, friends, as stimuli arrive in your life, no matter how small or large they may be, take a brief moment to realize that it is a subtle invitation to extend God's realm on earth. Then picture all of heaven waiting on the edge of their chair, leaning in, ready to celebrate with you when you choose well. Imagine the God of the universe shouting, "She said yes!" or "He said yes!"

Do this, and you will have a wondrous Wednesday!

Prayer -- God of the whole world, I'm not sure where I fit in your future, and I'm not sure whether my role will be large or small, but I want to make you smile, in Jesus. Amen.