

## Mother Mary

### [Luke 1:26-38](#)

A Christmas Family Portrait  
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Sunday, December 22, 2002

For almost five hundred years, Mary has been at the focal point of controversy. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters believe Mary was specially prepared by God for her role as mother of the Messiah, that she was immaculately conceived, that she lived a life of moral perfection, and that she remained a virgin for the rest of her life. We Protestants find no evidence for those beliefs in the Scriptures, so we respectfully disagree. Unfortunately, our disagreement has too often distanced us, not only from those with whom we disagree, but from Mary. Not wanting to paint a halo over her head, we have virtually air-brushed her out of the picture. We are generally in such a hurry to get to the babe in the manger that we walk right past the mother as if this were not just a virgin birth, but a motherless birth. But Mary found favor with God; how can we do less than give her our highest respect?

For one thing, WE CAN APPRECIATE MARY FOR HER UNAFFECTED PLAINNESS. If there had been a video camera in Mary's home the day Gabriel came calling, you might have seen a fourteen year old girl preparing breakfast for the family and then washing the dishes. You could watch her sweep the floor, haul water from the town well, kneed dough for tomorrow's bread, and catch up with the mending. There was no halo over her head, there was no aura radiating from her face, just the ruddy complexion of a girl used to hard work, a teenager whose life to that point had contained little more than the dull routine of daily chores.

We might prefer to think of Mary in her room reading the Bible when Gabriel appeared. But for several reasons that's unlikely. First, she probably didn't have a room of her own. Second, most families couldn't afford the costly hand-written scrolls that comprised the Bible in those days. And, finally, Mary's hard-scrabble life didn't afford time for the luxury of reading, if she could read at all, since only boys went to school back then. According to the Gospel narratives God chooses Mary quite apart from any qualities inherent within her or any merit earned by her. She may be beautiful or plain; it makes no difference to God. She may be highly intelligent or a simple peasant; it makes no difference to God. She may possess a rich dowry or be as poor as a church mouse; it makes no difference to God. She may be morally pure or as flawed as you and I; it makes no difference to God. The Apostle Paul might have had Mary in mind when he wrote, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor 1:27-29)

Mary never boasted. She never thought of herself as anything more than a servant of the Lord. She went on no world tours, she wrote no autobiographies, she gave no interviews to the Roman press, she sold no movie rights, she appeared on no talk shows, she franchised no Mary dolls. She was as plain as the girl next door, and isn't that a trait we can appreciate? To whom do you turn when storm clouds gather? Not to those who trot out their awards and accomplishments, the name droppers, the social climbers, the people who stand six feet above contradiction. We may admire celebrities but we confide in ordinary folk because they are just like us. Nor will others confide in us if we forget that, like everyone else, we came into this world in utter helplessness and will leave as we came. So if we have achieved any notoriety or wisdom or experience or stature it is because God has looked with favor on us, for in God's sight we like Mary are nothing more than lowly servants. Whatever your position, your power, your prominence, magnify the Lord, not yourself. For just a few millimeters below your persona there lies a plain, ordinary human being who owes all that you are and have to God.

WE CAN APPRECIATE MARY ALSO FOR HER UNCONCEALED PERPLEXITY. Almost every time Mary shows up in the Gospels she is puzzled about something and doesn't mind admitting it. When Gabriel appeared she was "much perplexed" by his words. Well, of course she was. Wouldn't you be? When the shepherds showed up and shared what they had heard about the newborn child, "Mary treasured all these

words and pondered them in her heart." She "treasured" them as if they were too precious to talk about at her Tuesday Bible study. And she "pondered them in her heart" as if she couldn't quite make heads or tails out of them.

Then there was the time their twelve year old son stayed behind in Jerusalem after the family left for home in Nazareth. Three days later the visibly upset parents found him discussing theology with seminary professors in the Temple. A perplexed Mary said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart." (Luke 2:48ff) Treasured them, but didn't fully understand them.

A Spanish saint once prayed for his people, "May God deny you peace and give you glory." Mary would have no difficulty understanding that prayer. For all the glory of birthing the Savior, she had very little peace in rearing him. Her son was like a jigsaw puzzle to Mary. She undoubtedly put the outline together; that's the easy part, isn't it? But she couldn't fill out the center. The pieces simply wouldn't mesh. I, for one, find that reassuring because there is so much about life that I don't understand. And if you are as puzzled as I am, we may take comfort in the company of Mary, for she remained perplexed throughout her life over the mystery of God's incarnation in her Son.

But that did not stop Mary from saying yes to God. So, finally, let us honor Mary for her UNALTERABLE PROMISE TO GOD: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I have no doubt she could have refused God's offer, for God is no tyrant. God never forces, never coerces, never compels. Or she might have bargained with God: "Lord, answer all my questions in advance and I'll consider your offer. Tell me what I'm in for, show me how this will change my life." But Mary, plain Mary, perplexed Mary, Mary says "Yes." Mary, trusting God to know what is best, promises to go with God.

Are you ready to say "Yes" to God? To promise to follow wherever God calls you?

I hope the students among us will ponder Mary's promise when you choose your future career. The world says, Go for the money you can make. Mary says, Go for the ministry you can do. Choose, if you can, a career that promotes human well-being. I hope the retirees among us will ponder Mary as you plan for your golden years. The culture says, Grab as much fun as you can. Mary says, Give as much of yourself as you can. Mentor a struggling student, read for the blind, visit a lonely widow.

I hope every person here will ponder Mary's promise as you think about your relationship with God. You may think God is remote, insensible to you, and indifferent to your needs. Or you may think yourself too small, too insignificant to merit God's attention. Mary proves otherwise, for Mary was the utterly plain, often perplexed teenager in Nazareth whom God knew, whom God called by name, whom God made a full partner in God's plan to redeem the human race.

And I tell you, as plain as you may be, as perplexed as you may feel, God wants you too as a partner, not for so dramatic a birth as Mary's, but a birth nonetheless. You can be reborn by faith in Mary's Son Jesus, and then, by your loving actions, you can give this tired old world a rebirth of hope, joy, love and peace.

And if you're not sure how to go about it, Mary's promise is a good place to start. Say it today. Say it right now: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your Word."