

# Sermon Notes



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Mary

Are you seated comfortably? Then I'll begin. This is the story of Mary. There are lots of Marys in the Bible but this story is about the most famous of them all, the mother of Jesus. And it isn't even Christmas!

Traditionally, protestant and independent churches have avoided saying much about Mary. Perhaps it is a reaction to the way the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have venerated her in so many ways that she appears more god-like than human.

Since early Christianity, Christians have adored and venerated Mary. Some of that came from God Himself when He sent the angel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she was now pregnant with the Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. God did not spare His praise of Mary so early Christians joined in and attributed to her every good and perfect quality.

Because she gave birth to Jesus who was the Son of God and forever coequal with God, by the 5th century, she was commonly called "the mother of God." The Catholic Church has increased her titles and her status repeatedly, saying that she, too, was immaculately conceived, that she remained a virgin forever, and that she was assumed into heaven (though after death).

They call her the Blessed Mother, the Mother of God, Saint Mary, Our Lady, Queen of Heaven and God Bearer.

Ready to be surprised? She is also very highly regarded in Islam. There, as in Aramaic and Hebrew, she is known as Maryam or Miriam. Muslims call her "Our Lady" in a parallel to the way they address their prophets as "Our Lord."

She is called "Tahira" which means "one who has been purified." Muslims teach that only Mary and Jesus lived lives completely untouched by evil. As the only woman untouched by evil, she holds an exceptionally high place in Islam. Two of the longer chapters in the Quran are named after her and her family. She is mentioned more in the Quran than she is in the Bible!

After the 1st century, many books and stories were written about her, some of which have entered our tales and holiday stories. Some of them are so fantastical or over the top that, in their attempt to show her respect, they make her non-human.

So...let's go back and see if we can find Mary, the real Mary.

The Gospel of Luke mentions Mary most often – 12x. All of these mentions come from the first two chapters of Luke. Luke was a physician, an artist, and a historian. Only he among the writers of scripture speak of what Mary thought, about her emotions, and about why she made this or that decision. Why? The most likely answer is that he interviewed her.

Matthew mentions Mary 5x. Only one of those times is found outside the infancy narrative of Matthew chapters 1 and 2. In Matthew 13:55-56 Mary is mentioned as Jesus's mother merely in an attempt to lessen his status. "Isn't he just...?"

The Gospel of Mark names her once, in chapter 6:3 and it is the same event that Matthew mentioned in chapter 13. He mentions Jesus' mother without naming her in Mark 3:31-32 in a passage we need to talk about.

Reading this passage without context, it seems that Jesus has snubbed and rejected his mother and family. That is not the case. His brothers had come to get Jesus and shut him up. His teachings and his story were bringing shame on them, in their opinion. Mary would have had no voice or power in this matter. Jesus named those who loved him and followed him as his family – which is a comfort to us, for certain. At the cross, it is plain to see that Jesus never rejected or forgot about his mother.

The Gospel of John mentions Jesus' mother twice but never mentions her name.

In the Book of Acts, Mary and the brothers of Jesus are mentioned in the company of the eleven apostles who are gathered in the upper room as the Holy Spirit arrives in power.

So, this girl from Nazareth... have we told her story yet? Not even close. Young girls could be betrothed at the age of 12 years and 6 months. Early Christians placed Mary at around 13 or 14 when she was betrothed to Joseph. These things seem so very strange to us but it was a way of keeping society functioning and keeping as many people fed and working as possible.

A betrothed girl would go with her future husband and live with him. Generally, there was no sexual contact between them until after puberty but we can assume abuses occurred often...but not between Joseph and Mary.

And what about Joseph? Tradition has it that he was much older than Mary...but that was the norm. In most instances, men were allowed to make their own way in life when they reached 30 (the age Jesus was when he left home and started his ministry). The age difference was not as important as his ability to provide for and protect his wife and their children. That said, there were many instances where the husband was in his 20s so we can't be certain here.

Two main reasons people had for assuming Joseph was much older? Other than convention, it is because he is no longer mentioned after Jesus turns 12. He isn't with the sons and Mary as they come to get Jesus. It was assumed that he died – a very common thing in families of that day and up until about 100 years ago. The other reason they thought he was older? That is more complicated...

Sometimes, when we solve a theological dilemma, we cause two more in their place. Catholics have hallowed virginity and chastity, making it a high mark of faith. Their priests cannot marry and nuns are said to have taken a higher road by perpetuating their virginity. When so many early Christians venerated Mary, they kept finding new ways of saying she was 100% fantastic and wonderful, far, far above any other human. So...they said she was conceived by a virgin, too, and that she stayed a virgin her whole life...

That caused a problem... what can we do with those in scripture said to be Jesus's brothers and sisters? Two answers to that question have been given: the words for brothers and sisters also mean "cousins" (not true) or Joseph was a widow and he had children already. That causes other problems as they are not mentioned at the birth, the flight to Egypt, or anywhere until Jesus is a full adult.

There is one other possibility: at some time, Joseph doubted Mary's story or could not put up with the incessant rumors about her and about Jesus's parentage (wasn't called "Son of Joseph" in Matthew 13 or Mark 6!). As a religious Jew, called righteous, he had the right to leave and start over with a new family. Did he? We have no idea.

That brings us back to Mary. When Mary heard the words of Gabriel in Luke 1, the scripture says she was "greatly troubled." This was not mere puzzlement; it was upset and upheaval. At her young age, she knew what this would do to her life – at least in part. She humbly accepted what God had decreed but you can almost hear the anticipation in her voice, her knowledge that this will be a rough road. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to be as you have said."

When we read the Magnificat, the prayer or song of Mary in Luke 2, we see that she was an educated young lady and was very capable of seeing what this birth would mean to the world order of things. She saw kingdoms and kings being tossed aside, the poor and humble lifted up, and the mercy of God extended over many.

She was, in a word, remarkable.

However...she was also a marked woman. There is plenty of evidence in scripture that the common people didn't accept Mary's story. "We know our father" (John 8:19) His own brothers didn't believe in him until after the resurrection. That means that Mary hauled water alone. She worked in her garden alone. She shopped alone. Her face would have been lined, her hands callused.

She was a person. This hurt. Every day. And then...she had to stand there and watch her son be humiliated and die on the cross. "Mary, Did You Know?" No, not really. She knew a lot, but knowing the facts isn't anywhere near the same thing as knowing how it would feel to be Mary, the mother of Jesus, shamed by the world, adored in heaven.

Want to know a secret...that shouldn't be a secret? You are also adored in heaven. He knows the number of hairs on your head. When Daniel is frightened by the visions and collapses at the feet of the angel, he is told "Daniel, you are highly regarded in heaven." The writer of Hebrews tells us that a cloud of witnesses is pulling for us. We see Jesus standing when one of his people die and enter heaven.

Mary's story, like yours, is full of pain...and meaning. Even if that meaning is hidden from you right now, it is not hidden from God. Look at Jesus and live your story.