

Finding Mary

Luke 1:26-56

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You've all seen Russian nesting dolls before, right? Some of them are really ornate and very, very valuable. These, on the other hand, came from Amazon this week. I love these dolls because you don't know when you start how many dolls are inside – how many times you will be able to open a new doll until you get to the last one, like the secret at the center.

I brought these dolls this morning, because I have been on a quest this week to find Mary, the mother of Jesus, to find an image that rings true in my heart of the real person who bore that precious child, and who bore all the joy and sorrow that came with that gift of God. Mary feels hidden from me by stack upon stack of nesting dolls.

First, I looked at scripture to find her. This is the outermost doll, the one everyone can see. The Gospel of Luke says that Mary is betrothed to Joseph, and the angel Gabriel appears to her and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor in God's sight. You are to conceive and bear a son, who will be named Jesus, and he will have the throne of his ancestor David, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary asks how this can be, since she is a virgin. The angel explains, "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you, and the child that will be born will be known as the Son of God." Mary says simply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

In the next scene, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. When she enters the house, Elizabeth's unborn child leaps in her womb. Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is indeed the mother of the Lord. Mary responds with the beautiful canticle, the Magnificat, which has been set to music by so many great composers: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for God has looked with favor on my lowly state. Surely from now on, all generations shall call me blessed." These are beautiful words, more beautiful still when they are sung by a fabulous soprano. But I don't get a feeling in them for Mary herself, and there is very little in scripture to paint a realistic picture of her.

So, I search further, the second doll in our nest. I think of all the centuries of tradition that have built up in the church around Mary. The Greek church calls her Theotokos – the God bearer. There is a whole liturgical calendar of feast days to honor her. I like feasts! Both the Greek church and the Roman church for centuries asserted the dogma of Immaculate Conception – that Mary herself was, from the moment of her conception, free of all sin and full of God's grace. There are many Christians – from the second Century to today – who believe in the Perpetual Virginity of Mary – that she was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Many Catholic Christians have adopted a deep and formal devotion to her. I find these devotions beautiful, and if you are a devotee of Mary, I applaud you, but this image of Mary feels distant to me. It does not satisfy me. I am looking for someone I might recognize on the street, if I had lived in Israel two thousand years ago.

So, I search further still, the third doll in the stack. I read what scholars have to say. Friends, I have read reams about Mary this week. I have read the *New Interpreters Bible* commentary, the four commentaries from *Feasting on the Word*, and Raymond Brown's hefty tome *The Birth of the Savior*. I have read arguments about translation and mistranslation of various words in today's scripture. I learned that the Magnificat was likely composed by Luke separately from today's text, and then inserted into it later. Or maybe that the Magnificat was originally sung not by Mary at all but by a sect of early Christians called the Anawim – the Poor Ones, who relied solely on God's grace. And maybe Mary was one of the Anawim herself. Really? Usually studying what scholars have written helps me to dig deeply into a text, but it feels like all this scholarship is taking me further and further from Mary herself. But ... I did find a few small clues here:

Mary was probably very young, the scholars said – only 12 or 13 years old. And Joseph was already an established craftsman, probably much older than she. Their betrothal was a much more formal commitment than an engagement

today. Mary's future was signed and sealed already, though she had not yet joined Joseph's household. I am beginning to get just a hint of a picture of her.

So, next, I turned to the fourth doll, great artists. I looked at dozens and dozens of paintings of Mary from different times and places. I selected four representative images that you can see on your bulletin insert. On the front of your insert is a 15th Century image – a detail from Botticelli's famous painting *The Magnificat*. Look how formal Mary is, and how white! She is receiving a celestial crown. This is the classic image of Mary. But the next three are more meaningful to me. Inside the insert you will see a 17th Century image, the *Blue Madonna*, by Carlo Dolci. Mary is thoughtful here. She seems to have depth to her spirit. The next image is by contemporary Haitian American artist Patricia Brintle. It is vibrant, and it reminds me that Mary was not white, and that people from all cultures have imagined her in ways that they could relate to. Mary, somehow like themselves. I think this is a beautiful image of Mary and Jesus. But my very favorite image of her is on the back of the insert. It is by the 19th Century painter Gary Melchers. This is the image that stirs my imagination. Mary seems young here, and vulnerable, and exhausted from giving birth. This Mary does not ride serenely above it all; she is in the very middle of this story with her whole body, her whole spirit, and it takes everything she has to give.

Finally, we come to the last doll. Here is Mary herself, at last, the one I can now imagine, the one I might meet on the street back then. She is so young, practically a child, and an angel appears to her, with a message from God. She is frightened, as I would be if an angel were to appear in my living room. He quiets her fears and then tells her that she is to conceive a child – not in the ordinary way, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. And her child is to be the Son of God. The Bible doesn't say how long it took her to respond. Let's give her the grace of a few minutes to take it all in. Finally, she says, "Yes. Yes. I will do this."

But this leaves Mary with a problem. She is a pregnant teenager, not yet wed to Joseph, but promised to him. What will he think? And the neighbors are starting to talk. They are not always kind. So, Mary goes to her cousin Elizabeth, who shelters her for a while. This is a difficult time for Mary, just at that age when we all wanted – more than anything in the world – to fit in with the people around us, and Mary is definitely not fitting in with her neighbors. And she has morning sickness. Her own body doesn't feel familiar any more. Every first-time mother worries whether she will know what to do when her child is finally born, how to take care of her baby, how to be a mother. Ordinarily she would probably consult her relatives for advice, but what can her aunts possibly teach her about raising THIS child, this Son of God? How will she manage? Even in this distressing and confusing time, from somewhere in her soul, Mary finds the peace, the grace, from which to praise God:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked on my humble estate. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for God who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is God's name...."

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I don't suppose that any of us will ever be in exactly Mary's situation, but we all come to times in our lives when we don't know which way is up, when all our plans are up-ended, and we are alone and afraid. We all have periods when we don't seem to fit in our own skin any more. When those times come, I pray that we will take the time we need, to remember God's great gifts to us, to remember that God has worked through the lowliest and least likely people to accomplish God's purposes, to recall that God is not finished with us yet. And then, even in the most anxious times, may we hear our own voices praising God as Mary did:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Amen and Amen