

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

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Place a statue, icon, or picture of Mary beside an open bible at the center of your group. Have group members identify persons you know whose names are a version of the name Mary.

LEADER: Hail Mary, full of grace, as we are.

ALL: We hold your name holy.

LEADER: Holy Mary, mother of God.

ALL: You trusted God's word, as we must.

LEADER: In you, a mother's love changes the course of history.

ALL: You gave God flesh to dwell among us.

LEADER: You ponder the mystery of God—

ALL: As we must. Amen.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



Down the hall prints of a chubby-cheeked new baby appeared on Michaela's closed door every week until the new mom returned to work. If the new baby laughs as much in life as her mom did in pregnancy, she will be a happy child. We witnessed her mom's endless hungers. Her stresses rekindled the memories of pregnancy for others at lunch. We shared the joy when mom and dad packed her in the car seat with the stroller ready in the back and brought Imogene to show her off in person.

Pregnancy draws women into Earth's work of giving life. For nine months a woman's life is not her own. A mom can work like lightning designing publications on computer, but she can't hurry the baby. The child unfolds on Earth's program. The next 1,000 days of care make all the difference in the child's development.

Mothering matters. Fathering matters. Human babies come into the world unable to care for themselves. Parents are on call to feed, change, and soothe the baby 24/7. Slowly a child begins to recognize this faithful caregiver,

and in doing so, begins to trust the world and form a bond with someone in it.

Most of what mothers do goes without saying in the gospels. We know only that Mary wraps Jesus in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger. But without the care parents give children through sleepless nights in the first year and harried efforts to stay a step ahead of them in the terrible twos, children would not grow up and flourish. We know Mary mothered Jesus because he grew in grace and wisdom.

● How has mothering mattered to you?

GOSPEL

Mary ponders the shepherds' words.



NARRATOR 1: The shepherds left their fields and went in haste to Bethlehem. They found Mary and Joseph, and the infant, lying in a manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about his child.

NARRATOR 2: All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

NARRATOR 3: Mary pondered all these words in her heart.

NARRATOR 1: The shepherds returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

NARRATOR 2: After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child.

NARRATOR 3: He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke 2.15-21

Who is the Mary of history, the model disciple?

As a means of reflecting on Mary, the Mother of God, Sunday's gospel offers only a single sentence. That sentence turns on the single word *pondered*. This word suggests her character in the narrative. Mary ponders all she has heard from the shepherds and surely how she wound up in a stable giving birth.

Symballein is the Greek word that the word *ponders* translates. Literally the word means *to throw together, to wrestle with together*. *Sym* is a prefix meaning *with*. *Ballein* is verb meaning *throw*. For Mary to ponder is to interpret the events that her life is throwing at her. Her faith is seeking understanding.

Earlier in Luke's narrative the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive in her

womb and bear a son, whom she will name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High (Luke 1.30-32).

The angel's words *perplex* Mary, another verb that hints an active mind. The promise makes no sense to her, so she questions the angel. How can she have a child when she is a virgin; she has had no sexual relations with Joseph. This detail suggests Mary is very young. Girls commonly married soon after they began to menstruate and could bear children.

● **What verb expresses how you imagine Mary receiving the shepherds' news—ponders, treasures, interprets, accepts, mulls over, weighs, thinks about, reflects on, theologizes?**

In Mark's gospel we meet Mary more than perplexed about her son. Jesus is already an adult. People from all over Israel, are coming to Galilee to hear Jesus and seek healing. His family hears that Jesus is attracting crowds and goes to stop him because people are saying, "He has gone out of his mind" (3.21). This delegation includes his mother and brothers.

When they arrive, Jesus keeps his blood family outside the house where he is teaching. He refuses to see them, redefines family, and opens his community to all. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (3.35).

This scene prevents us from thinking that Mary knows her son's mission and willingly accepts all that Jesus does. Mary is full of grace but an ordinary human person. She has to interpret what happens in her life and the life of her son as events unfold.

In Mark's gospel Mary fears for her son. Jesus is stirring up unrest in Galilee; Jewish religious leaders and/or the occupying Roman soldiers will come down on him. In this scene Mary is a mother who sees her child endangering himself and perhaps his kin, going beyond what she ever imagined he would do. She goes in person to challenge and protect him. But he doesn't listen to his mother.

● **What do you imagine Mary pondering at 15 when Jesus is born? At 45 when Jesus starts his ministry?**



● **When have your children challenged you to grow beyond your dreams for them?**

In the first two chapters of his gospel, Luke surrounds Jesus' birth with echoes from Israel's sacred scriptures to interpret the event. His narrative makes theological claims about who Jesus is rather than record simple historical information. By making claims about Jesus, Luke recognizes Mary's significance in Israel's history.

The angel assures Mary that God is with her and that nothing is impossible with God. These words repeat the promise the three strangers make to Sarah and Abraham. Nothing is too wonderful for God to do; long-barren Sarah will have a child next year. Luke sees in Jesus' birth God's promise once again fulfilled.

Mary's *fiat* is a typical response to a prophetic call. The angel explains the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary; her child will be the Son of God. Mary

Until Jesus' rising from the dead and the coming of his fiery Spirit upon the community at Pentecost, Mary was a practicing Jewish woman, who keeps the law of Moses and worships at the temple. Robert Lentz's icon of Mary as a Daughter of Zion pictures her wearing the yellow star and identifying with the Jews exterminated in the Holocaust. Jesus holds the commandments. Find prints at trinitystores.com.



responds as other prophets in Israel's history have responded to God's call, "Here I am." I am present, ready to serve you.

Centuries of devotion obscure who Mary was in history. However, geography, social science, and archaeology can help sketch the life of a Jewish peasant woman, living in Galilee 2,000 years ago. To visit Elizabeth, Mary walks from Nazareth to a town near Jerusalem 75 miles away. When Joseph has to register for a census in Bethlehem, Mary travels with him from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem. Did she walk or bump along on a donkey as she neared full term of her pregnancy?

Economically Mary belongs among the 90% of the people who were poor in Israel, who paid temple taxes and Roman taxes. Excavations in Nazareth find houses built around courtyards, where people ground flour, prepared meals, fed their animals, and cared for one another's children. The houses have dirt floors. Mary belongs to a social class that works hard to survive and provide for their families.

Significantly in Luke's birth narrative, Mary and Joseph can find no place to stay in Bethlehem. Mary has her first child in a stable or cave for animals. The sign the shepherds find is the savior, lying in a manger, born among the poor, one of them.

In *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson invites us to recognize all Luke sums up in the words, "And she gave birth."

The phrase recalls women's pain and strength involved in laboring, sweating, counting contractions, breathing deeply, crying out, dilating, pushing hard while riven to the very center of one's being with unimaginable bursts of pain, until slowly, slowly, the baby's head finally appears and with more pushing the little creature slips from the birth canal, to be followed by the discharge of the placenta, with much bleeding, and then deep fatigue, breasts swollen with milk, and unpredictable hormonal swings. ...Real blood was shed at this delivery, by a poor woman of peasant society far from home, laboring in childbirth for the first time. And it was holy (277).

- How does the Mary of history compare with the Mary of your devotion?

Many women theologians today seek to rescue the real Mary of history from the idealized Virgin Mother of doctrine and devotion. Idealizing Mary distances her from ordinary women. She becomes one of a kind, unlike the rest of us, immaculately conceived and uniquely assumed into heaven. She becomes an nearly divinized icon rather than a model disciple who struggles to understand her son.

In Church history, male theologians have too often imagined Mary as the ideal meek, submissive woman who knows her place in support of her Son. What about her public witness at the cross? What does she do with the fiery tongue she received at Pentecost? How does she influence the infant Christian community in Jerusalem?

- What do you imagine Mary doing after Pentecost?

FIRST READING

God is gracious.

The lectionary chooses Israel's classic benediction as the Old Testament reading to help us reflect on Sunday's gospel. The book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Pentateuch, begins with a census of the tribes in the wilderness of Sinai. Moses organizes the tribes into a camp with the tent of meeting in the middle. The Meeting Tent houses the Ark, which contains the tablets of the commandments.

Then Moses turns to his brother Aaron and organizes the tribe of Levi, the tribe that will serve the people as priests. Yahweh tells Moses to tell his brother Aaron how to bless the people.

The blessing refers to God's face, which no one has ever seen. The imagery of the blessing makes God personal, kind, and gracious. The Creator God of this blessing is the God who does the impossible in Mary, who promises mercy to us forever.

Israel's blessing from God

The Holy One said to Moses, "Speak to Aaron and his descendants and tell them: This is

how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them: The Holy One bless and keep you. The face of the Holy One shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Holy One look upon you kindly and give you peace.

So shall Aaron and his descendants put my name upon the Israelites and I will bless them.

Numbers 6.22-27

- What blessings do you wish for your children?
- For what blessings do you hope from God?
- What is God's greatest blessing to you?

PRAY

LEADER: Holy One, bless us and look upon us with kindness as you have blessed Mary and filled her with grace.

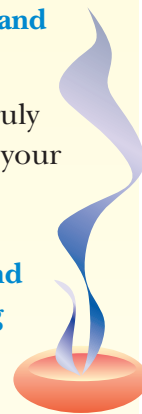
ALL: Here, I am, seeking to live as Jesus' disciple.

LEADER: Holy Mary, mother of God and model for us.

ALL: May our love give birth to holy children and communities of faith.

LEADER: Holy Mary, truly our sister, you named your son and embraced his mission.

ALL: May we reflect and grow in understanding our faith as you did. Amen.



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DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Visit a shelter for mothers and babies and find how your group can help.
- Visit heifer.org to read stories of women farmers around the world.