

LEARN FROM MARY TO GLORIFY THE LORD

In your nativity scene at home, no doubt the most important and most interesting character is the baby. The baby Jesus is the most powerful force in the universe, but now he looks like a little baby. And all of history is divided by this child. No matter how you label years, everything breaks down into things that happened before this night and things that happened after this night. The baby is the most interesting and the most important. He's God! But second most interesting character, for so many people is the mom, Mary. For two thousand years now, the world has been filled with questions and theories, and songs about Mary. A recent favorite is the song, [Mary Did You Know?](#) which says, "Mary, do you know what's going to happen to your little baby?" One of my favorites is an old tune called the [Christ Child Lullaby](#), which imagines what Mary might have sung to Jesus. The Bible doesn't actually say that much about Mary, and so historically Lutherans have been a little shy about discussing or praising Mary. But tonight we get to. We won't speculate about things myths and superstition. We'll:

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WHO WAS MARY?

So who was she? Well the Bible gives us some information about her.

She was a young woman. There is a big debate about her specific age, but the primary source says she was "**pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.**" (Luke 1:27) which back then would have made her in her teens or maybe her twenties. And of course she's a virgin. Some people say, that just means she was young. But no. It means she had not slept with a man. That's why when the angel told her she'll have a baby she asked, "**How can this be, since I am a virgin.**" (Luke 1:34)

She was from Nazareth, a little village up North, far from the movers and shakers in Jerusalem. It was not a glorious hometown. In fact, when one of Jesus disciples heard that the Messiah was from up North he said, **“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46)** Well, Mary came from there!

She was a relative of Elizabeth. Last week we heard about the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth, an older woman who had a baby with Zechariah the priest. Their baby was John the Baptist. So Mary is young and Elizabeth is old but they are related, so when Mary finds out she is expecting, she goes to tell Elizabeth.

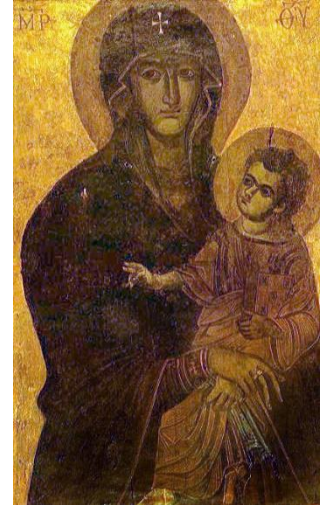
So you start to see the sketch the Bible draws of Mary, and it’s entirely unimpressive. There were certainly exceptional young ladies in Isarel, daughters of high priests, or extra pretty girls, or ones who memorized whole psalms. But the Bible doesn’t tell us any of that about Mary. There’s nothing special about her, except ... Except the big thing. She’s God’s mom. I realize that doesn’t make any sense—that she was feeding God through and umbilical cord. But she was. **“The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on 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.’” (Luke 1:35)** Mary was God’s mom. But why? Why her?

WAS MARY SO GREAT?

This is where we could really get ourselves in trouble. Throughout history Christians have tried to find something exceptional about Mary that made God choose her. And it started right away. Mary’s relative Elizabeth starts praising her. **“In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Luke 1:42-43)** And that

much was true. Mary was blessed.

About 300 years after the first Christmas, the Mary stuff got a bit out of hand. People were still trying to figure out how an ordinary girl could give birth to God. Their answer: maybe Mary never did anything wrong. So in pictures from that time you'll see a halo around Jesus but also a halo around Mary. But even if she never *did* any sins, the Bible still teaches that we *inherit* sin from our parents. It's as if sin is in our DNA. so 1000 years after the first Christmas some Christians said that Mary was the one exception to that rule. A few hundred years later Christians began to teach that not only Jesus but also Mary was conceived without inheriting original sin. This is the teaching of the immaculate conception. So you see pictures like this, which show Mary coming not from a sinful father but from the Holy Spirit. Finally some people even taught that if Mary had no sin, she didn't need to die, so she ascended into heaven—or technically she was assumed into heaven, sort of like Jesus. Now, none of those teachings are in the Bible. In fact the Bible indicates that Mary was not sinless. She needed to be saved from her sins. That's why she said, **“My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.”** (Luke 1:47). But these teachings gained traction because Christians wanted to show that Mary was great.



WAS MARY SO HUMBLE?

For the most part, protestants including Lutherans have avoided saying that Mary was sinless. But there's this other twisted way of viewing Mary. We know that nobody, including Mary, has anything to brag about before God. So there's this thought that you can sense in some Christmas carols and conversations that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus because she was *so* humble, so meek, so mild, that God had to choose her. And if you're not quiet and meek and mild, then maybe you're not humble enough for God. But that's a little messed up, isn't it? If you're trying to get ahead by being the most humble, then that's not being humble at all. That's trying to get ahead!

THE REAL REASON GOD CHOSE MARY

That's why the best information about Mary doesn't come from old paintings or from Lutherans. It comes from Mary. Remember that song from Mary we just heard? In that song, Mary didn't draw attention to how great she was and she didn't glorify how humble she was. She said, **"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."** (Luke 1:46-47) Martin Luther says about this, when a prince helps a beggar, it's not the beggar's poverty that gets the praise, but the prince's generosity. You see Mary is not the hero of Mary's song. God is.

GOD'S ATTENTION

And what heroic thing did God do? He noticed her. Mary sings, **"He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."** (Luke 1:48) God could survey the whole world and see all the brilliant, beautiful women in all of Israel. And of all those, he thought of Mary. Which is the fundamental blessing of God. Because when God looks at you, nothing but gifts and blessing and salvation can come from him.

There's fascinating research about how parents pay attention pay attention to kids.¹ There are huge favorable outcomes for kids—not even if their parents do everything right, but just if they are there for them. Moms and dads, if you've been barely keeping your head above water these days, thank you. Thank you for being in the chaos with your kids. And don't give up! You don't have to be perfect, but just being there, is a huge blessing. Jesus said, **"If you who are sinful, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts!" (Matthew 7:11)** I'll use the same comparison—if a sinful parent just paying attention to a child is such a blessing, then how much more blessings must come when your perfect Father in heaven is turns his face toward you! That's why we end ever worship service with the words **"The Lord look on you with favor." (Deuteronomy 6:26)** That's exactly what God did for Mary, because God's attention is unearned.

GOD ALWAYS SMILES DOWN

God always smiles down. Martin Luther said, **"He is the Most High, and there is nothing above him; he cannot look above him; nor to either side, for there is no one like him. He must, therefore, look beneath him; and the farther one is beneath him, the better does he see them."** (Luther's Works vol. 21 p. 300) I think of it like this: My social media is filled with the fanciest people, the most successful, the best and greatest, and there's nothing wrong with that. But if God followed people on Instagram, it would be the people we don't think of as great-- a toddler, the single parent, the widow, the family that's doing their best to hold it together. God always smiles down.

Humans have been trying to put Mary up on a pedestal. "She's so great!

¹ <https://www.gottman.com/blog/research-still-face-experiment/>
<https://youtu.be/apzXGEbZht0>

She's sinless! She's so humble!" We always look up to the high and mighty. But God always smiles down. And if you get all high and mighty you could excuse yourself from the beam of his blessing.

THE REAL REASON GOD LOVES YOU

We are all in danger of that. We live in this culture that says you've got to take pride in yourself. What does God think? **"He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."** (Luke 1:51) It seems like everybody is climbing the ladder to become number one in popularity, or influence, or success. But God? **"He has brought down the rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."** (Luke 1:52)

If you hear Mary's song and you take it to heart it's like, "Man, I get this wrong *every* day. I do not see things the way God does." It really takes you down a few notches, which is right where he's turned his face. More than that, it's right where his whole body came. That's the whole point of Christmas—that God who really is on high came down, came to us of all people. He gave us not just his attention, but all his love and his very life. And he has promised every spiritual blessing.

Why would he do that for you? Not because you were so holy. Not because you were so humble. He did it because he's merciful. God is the hero of your song, just like he was of Mary's.

And that's how we can learn from Mary how to glorify God. Amen.