

## “From This Day All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed”

Isaiah 35:1-10 • Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:46b-55 • James 5:7-10 • Matthew 11:2-11

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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The Third Sunday of Advent

Most of the scripture readings appointed for today are pretty similar to the readings we heard last week. We have another prophecy from Isaiah about the truly fabulous things that are yet to come. We have an exhortation from James about waiting patiently for the coming of the Lord. We have another reading from Matthew about the ministry of John the Baptist. All of that is pretty familiar territory for those of you who were here last week. The one notable exception is the canticle from Luke: the Song of Mary. This is a song that Mary sings while she is carrying Jesus in her womb.

So what I would like to do today, two weeks before Christmas, is talk about Mary. She has been, and remains to this day, one of the most revered figures in Christianity, second only to Jesus. She has been called many names: the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Mary, the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, *Madonna*, Our Lady, the Queen of Heaven, the Ever-Virgin, the All-Holy, and so on. There are a host of prayers addressed to Mary, innumerable churches dedicated to her, numerous doctrines pertaining to her (especially in the Roman Catholic Church), a large number of icons depicting her in different aspects (in the Orthodox churches), and, in a variety of Christian traditions, numerous days of the year in which some event in Mary's life is commemorated. All this devotion centers around *one specific individual*, who played a pivotal role in our salvation. But ... what do we *really know* about her?

The best source of information about Mary's life is the New Testament itself. These are the earliest and most reliable sources of information about her. Everything written later on is either based directly on the New Testament, or draws on old legends about her. The apostle Paul mentions her once, although not by name: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” (Galatians 4:4) The book of Revelation depicts her in a vision as “a woman clothed with the sun.” (Revelation 12:1) She shows up once in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, as part of a small group of Christians who gathered in the Upper Room for fellowship and prayer after the ascension of Jesus. (Acts 1:13-14) All the other references to Mary are in the four gospels, and most of those are found in Matthew and Luke's narratives about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Matthew says that when Jesus' “mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:18-19) But an angel of the Lord reveals to Joseph that the child Mary is carrying is “from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20) “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21) This is the fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah: “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:22-23) Joseph does as the angel bids; “he took her as his wife but

had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son.” (Matthew 1:24-25). The focus in Matthew’s account is more on Joseph than Mary, and Matthew does not record any of Mary’s words about the events that were unfolding. We are given precious little information about Mary herself.

Luke tells us a lot more, beginning with where Mary lived: “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.” (Luke 1:26-27) Gabriel tells Mary she has “found favor with God” (Luke 1:30): “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Luke 1:31-33) Mary asks: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34) Gabriel replies: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (Luke 1:35) Mary consents: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) This is called the Annunciation, as the angel *announces* to Mary what is to come. Gabriel departs, then Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, who also is pregnant; she will give birth to John the Baptist. Elizabeth perceives that Mary is bearing a very special child, and exclaims, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1:42-44)

It is at this point that Mary sings the song that we read earlier in today’s service. It is called “the Song of Mary,” or “the Canticle of Mary,” or, most commonly, “the Magnificat;” that name comes from the opening line of the song in Latin: “My soul *magnifies* the Lord.” It is a prayer written in the style of the Psalms in the Old Testament. It recounts some of God’s marvelous deeds on behalf of the people of God, and it has been set to music time and again. To this day, many Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and other Christians say or sing this prayer every day, at Vespers or Evening Prayer, while many Eastern Christians say or sing this prayer daily at Matins, in the darkness of the early morning.

Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth “about three months and then returned to her home.” (Luke 1:56) Then comes the decree from Emperor Augustus “that all the world should be registered.” (Luke 2:1) Everybody was required to go to their ancestral homes. So “Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.” (Luke 2:4-5) Bethlehem is very near Jerusalem, just a few miles away. “While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.” (Luke 2:6-7) Then shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night” see a vision of angels; they hasten to Bethlehem “and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.” They tell Mary and Joseph what the angels had told them, “and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:8-18) A week later, the baby is circumcised and formally named. (Luke 2:19) Mary and Joseph bring the baby to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord and to offer the sacrifice appointed for a poor family, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” (Luke 2:22-24) While they are there, a devout man named Simeon takes the baby in his arms and praises God, “for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:25-32) Mary and Joseph are amazed at Simeon’s words. Simeon says to Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” (Luke 2:33-35) A elderly prophet named Anna also recognizes who Jesus is; she “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:36-38) Then Mary and Joseph head to their home in Nazareth. (Luke 2:39)

Matthew tells us of some other major events that occurred before Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, beginning with the arrival of wise men from the east, searching for the newborn king of the Jews, whose star they had seen. These wise men make their way to Bethlehem, where “they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:1-12) But King Herod, filled with jealousy, sends men to kill the baby. Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt while Herod kills all the young children in and around Bethlehem. This tragic event is called “The Massacre of the Innocents,” and many Christian traditions remember those babies every year on December 28. Mary and Joseph stay in Egypt until Herod dies, then head back to Israel, to their home in Nazareth. (Matthew 2:13-23)

Luke tells us that every year after that, Mary and Joseph “went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.” (Luke 2:41) When Jesus was 12 years old he lingered in the temple for several days, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (Luke 2:42-47) Mary and Joseph find him there, and they are astonished at what they are seeing. Jesus asks 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.” They all head home, and “his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” (Luke 2:48-51)

The next time Mary shows up is some 18 years later, after Jesus has begun his ministry. She attends a wedding with him in the town of Cana. When the wine runs out, she brings it to his attention, and he performs his first public miracle. (John 2:1-11) After the wedding “he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples, and they remained there a few days.” (John 2:12) This begs the question: who were the *brothers* of Jesus? The Gospels mention four brothers by name – James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude – and indicate that there were at least two sisters as well. (Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3) There are four possibilities: (1) Some people reject the traditional teaching that Mary was a virgin, and claim that Jesus was the biological child of both Mary and Joseph. That would make the brothers and sisters of Jesus full siblings. This view is contrary to the official teachings of every branch of Christianity that exists today. (2) The most common view among Protestants is that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children who were born to Joseph and Mary *after* the birth of Jesus. They would thus be *half*-siblings of Jesus, all of them younger than Jesus. (3) Another view, held particularly by Eastern Orthodox Christians, is that these were children of Joseph from a previous marriage. That would make them *step*-siblings of Jesus, all of them *older* than Jesus. (4) A fourth view, the official view of the Roman Catholic Church, is that these were *cousins* of Jesus. The Greek word for “brothers” was routinely used for close relationships beyond those of immediate family. Some who hold this view believe that both Mary *and* Joseph remained virgins to the end of their days. Nothing in the Bible clearly addresses this matter. We know that at least six “brothers and sisters” of some sort existed. But there’s nothing indicating that Mary and Joseph *didn’t* have additional children after Jesus was born, nothing indicating that Joseph had been married previously, and nothing indicating that either Mary or Joseph remained celibate to the end of their days. The other possibilities are intriguing, but it could simply be the case that after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph lived a pretty normal married life, including sexual intimacy and additional children.

After the wedding at Cana, there are only a few other references to Mary in the Gospels. There’s a scene in which Jesus is teaching his disciples, and Mary and the siblings of Jesus show up. But he basically rebuffs them. (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35) It appears that, during part of his ministry, there was a rift between Jesus and his family. John specifically says that “his brothers did not believe in him.” (John 7:5) But Mary shows up prominently at the cross, in John’s version of that story. Jesus even speaks to her directly from the cross. (John 19:25-27; cf. Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41)

Mary may also have been one of the women who showed up at the empty tomb. (Mark 16:1) Within 40 days of Jesus' resurrection, Mary is clearly part of the community of followers who form the very beginnings of the Church. (Acts 1:13-14) And that is the last we hear of her in the Bible. It is generally assumed, but not necessarily a given, that she was present with the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

So ... there is nothing in the Bible about her parentage. Nothing specific about whether she had other children after Jesus. Nothing about her later life or death. She simply fades from the story.

Later Christians filled in some of the gaps. There is a book called "the Gospel of James," which was written sometime in the middle of the second century, more than a century after the death and resurrection of Christ. It led to many legends about Mary. According to this apocryphal gospel, Mary's parents were named Joachim and Anna (or Anne). They were wealthy but childless. Anna prays to God; God sends angels to announce a child will be born; Mary is born prematurely; Anna dedicates the child to God and sends her to the temple to be raised, where Mary is fed every day by an angel. When Mary is approaching puberty the priests find a guardian for her, an elderly widower named Joseph, who becomes her betrothed. While he is away on business, and Mary is working in the temple, the angel Gabriel arrives to tell her that she has been chosen to bear God's Son. The story that follows pretty much follows the biblical account of Jesus' birth, adding some details about a midwife and a miraculous birth that involves a very bright light and a cloud, representing the presence of God.

You may have heard of "Saint Anne"; there are a number of churches named for her – that was Mary's mother, according to these legends. Other legends say that Mary was always a virgin – that's the "doctrine of perpetual virginity"; that she was free from original sin at the moment of her conception – that's the "doctrine of immaculate conception"; that her life ended in a state of perpetual peace – that's the "Dormition of Mary" (the word "dormition" means "falling asleep"); and that when her life ended she was taken up, body and soul, into heaven – that's the "Assumption of Mary." Three of those doctrines are official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church; one is an official teaching in the Orthodox Church. But none of those have any basis in the Bible; all draw from later writings.

There are two doctrines about Mary that *do* have biblical basis. The first is the virgin birth of Jesus, which is affirmed in the early Christian creeds and remains the official teaching of every branch of Christianity that exists today. The second is the teaching that Mary is the Mother of God. There was a big argument about that way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, centering around the question, "Is it okay to call Mary the Mother of *God*, or should we call her the Mother of *Christ*?" Since Jesus is fully human *and* fully God, the Church decided in the year 431 that it is permissible to call her "Mother of God," or in Greek "Theotokos," which is how Orthodox Christians commonly refer to her, to this day.

In the Roman Catholic Church, Mary is often referred to "Madonna," which is an old Italian word meaning "Our Lady." She is also commonly referred to as the "Blessed Virgin Mary." Mary's blessedness is grounded in Elizabeth's words, "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42), and from Mary's own words in her song, "Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:48).

We should bless her too. It was *Mary* whom God chose to bear the Messiah and Savior of the world. It was *Mary* who, alone among all humanity throughout all the ages, gave birth to the one who is both the Son of God and God incarnate. She wasn't an *ordinary* human, like you or me. She alone was the one whom God "found favor" to become the Mother of God. Catholics call her the "Blessed Virgin Mary." We can call her that too ... for "surely from now on all generations will call me blessed."

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