

Chapter Four

The First Disciple: Mary in the Gospel According to Luke

Most of what we know about Mary from scripture comes from the Gospels of Luke and John. Both evangelists must have wanted the young church to revere Mary for her faithfulness. Both stationed her at strategic junctures in their gospels so she could model faithful discipleship for us.

Some scholars believe that the first two chapters of Luke, called the infancy narratives and laden with Marian material, were later additions to his gospel. They certainly were not notes which Luke took from interviews with Mary. Perhaps these first two chapters may have been added to counteract the very ancient heresy that the Jewish scriptures are worthless to Christian life. Thus, these first chapters of Luke focus on Jerusalem, the Temple, and its rites. They tell of Zechariah's priestly family. They include a song put on Mary's lips that was, in essence, the song of Hannah, mother of the prophet/judge Samuel, who lived twelve centuries before Christ. They demonstrate the centrality of the Temple in the life of the holy family.

They detail the Jewish rituals of circumcision and presentation of the first-born with sacrifice in the Temple. They tell of a family trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve, perhaps for a bar mitzvah. Luke 1–2 portrays two very Jewish families who nurtured two remarkable men, John and Jesus.

After the story of Zechariah's encounter with an angel and Elizabeth's conceiving, Luke introduces us to Mary of Nazareth. She is called "*highly favored one!*"

First Pericope

In the sixth month [since Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist] 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. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne

of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “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. And now your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing is impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26–38

Reflect: What did you notice in this pericope? Were there any surprises for you? When have you received God’s messages (for that is what *angelos* means in Greek: “messenger”) and by what means did you receive them? For example, through scripture, a worship service, a kind word, a correction from a friend, a dream, a “coincidence” that was too important to call coincidence?

Like Zechariah, Mary was troubled and “dialogued in her mind” what this angelic greeting could

mean. How long did she puzzle over this? The angel assured her that she need not be afraid, “for you have found favor (*charin*, or “grace”) with God.” What did that assurance do to her? How did she wrestle with her inner disturbance?

Reflect, Dialogue: How do you dialogue in your mind? Ask the Spirit to be your dialogue partner right now.

The angel explained that Mary would conceive and told her how this child would be named. Mary questioned, and unlike Zechariah, her questions received not a rebuke and a silencing, but an elucidation. “*How can this be since I know not man?*” For the Jews, *knowing* is such an intimate act that the word is used for sexual intercourse. “How can this be without intercourse?” Mary is asking. Mary received a two-fold answer: First, the Holy Spirit will come upon you; and secondly, the power—*dynamis* in Greek—of the most high will overshadow you. The word “overshadow” derives from the Greek word for the tent (or tabernacle) in which Israel carried the ark of the covenant with them in their desert trek to freedom.

For Luke (and for Paul), another name for the Holy Spirit is the power, the *dynamis*, the energy of God at work in the world. This power of God would overshadow Mary. The angel continued: “*This child will be called holy, Son of God.*”

Reflect, Dialogue: If you have children, how are they holy, children of God? Express your feelings to God, as Mary might have on this occasion. If you don't have physical children, "who" or "what" are your children, your creations of mind, heart, relationship? How are they holy?

Did Mary need more "proof"? The angel told her that her barren cousin was pregnant, "*for nothing is impossible with God*" (Lk 1:37).

Contemplate: Imagine the next nine months for Mary. Just try to be with her. That final angelic word—"nothing is impossible with God"—may have been ringing in her heart all those months. What particular word of God (a verse, a gospel incident) continues to nourish you, perhaps all your life? Ask the Spirit to help you remember. Listen.

Mary responded to God's messenger, to God's own self: "*Behold, I am the slave [literally] of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.*" Mary, this questioning, thoughtful, dialogic young woman, hardly sounds like a slave. Let the Spirit overshadow me, she agreed; let the power of the Most High enliven my womb.

Pray: Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with you. Let it be done to us, too, according to God's word.

Newly pregnant, Mary went with haste about seventy miles south, to the hills of Judea, to visit her

cousin Elizabeth, also with child. When they greeted each other, the older woman was filled with the Holy Spirit, “gave a loud shout,” and began to know more than she knew.

Second Pericope

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave a loud shout: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting the child in my womb leapt for joy. Blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would come to completion.”

Luke 1:41–45

Wonder: “Mother of my Lord.” What might the Spirit want you to call Mary? What if Mary should come to you? What would be your response?

Mary responded with a prayer known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of Mary’s hymn in Latin. “*My whole being magnifies the Lord.*”

Reflect: To magnify. To make bigger. Imagine a peasant girl making God bigger. How in your life do you mirror God, magnify God? If you are puzzled, ask the Spirit to teach you.

The Magnificat is modeled on the prayer of joy Hannah prayed when she gave birth to Samuel, who would be the last of Israel's judges. No matter whether Mary sang it under the influence of the Spirit or if Luke composed it later, we learn that either Luke or Mary was permeated with the language of the scriptures. Mary continued her exulting in God's goodness, and particularly God's justice toward the lowly remnant of Israel who had remained faithful to God. All her praise was directed to God, whose mercy is abundant, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. As Jesus will later turn the moral values of his co-religionists inside out, challenging their reliance on Law and overturning their notions of sin and righteousness, so did Mary here. God always remembers mercy, she insisted. (Compare 1 Samuel 2:1–8 with Luke 1:46–55).

Luke moves Mary back to Nazareth before the story returns to Elizabeth and John's birth. It seems that instead of waiting for John's birth, Mary only stayed in Judea about three months and then returned to her house. This was no easy journey for a young, unprotected, and pregnant woman. She probably would have traveled with a caravan. What might she have been feeling?

Contemplate: Can you walk with a young pregnant woman along a dusty road? What do you smell? Can you

hear the sounds of the donkeys and camels, rich merchants and simple peddlers? What will the two of you talk about? What will the silences feel like? How does it feel to leave the security of Elizabeth's warmth? How does it feel to face the future? How will she and Joseph converse when they are reunited? What does Mary want from her husband-to-be? Ask her. Listen. Seventy miles. What happens when dark falls? What do the two of you talk about in the dark?

Jesus, as both a child and an adult in Luke's gospel, would always be on the road. *In utero*, Jesus made the journey from Galilee to Judea twice. Luke's intention in constructing this second journey, made because of a census decreed by the Roman emperor, was to portray Jesus as poor and homeless. Joseph, betrothed to Mary "who was with child," was ordered to be enrolled in Joseph's city of origin, Bethlehem, town of David.

Pray: You, Lord, who are mighty have done great things for this young woman, and you are doing great things for us. Help us to believe that nothing is impossible with you, and to trust.

Third Pericope

All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. 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 because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:3–7

Because there was no place for them in the inn, Mary labored and gave birth somewhere near a manger. We imagine her giving birth in a stable or a cave, but there is no mention of any shelter in Luke's account until *after* the baby is born. To see a woman in labor, or to be in labor, is a violent and dramatic event. Sweat, blood, tears, cries. All of this for how long? Where? A street? An open field? Helped by whom? If Joseph were a shepherd, he would at least have been familiar with birthing. But he wasn't.

Wonder, Contemplate: Imagine the terror and tension in the two young parents as the baby passed through the birth canal. Enter into the scene. Did Joseph reach for the crowning head, mop up the blood, comfort his beloved, or was Mary alone? Imagine Mary's pain and fear. Ask for the grace to feel with her. Can you stay with her? Can you stay silent and just gaze on her?

There have been those throughout the centuries who say that being without “original sin” preserved Mary from the punishment of Eve, who would bear her children in pain. Is Mary a real woman, or a plastic statue? Why would God let her be exempt from terror when her son was obviously in panic-stricken agony in the garden of Gethsemane? Jesus labored in pain and gave birth to the church on Calvary, so why would God let Mary be exempt from labor pains? She is a strong woman, as are all women who willingly go through this experience of fear and physical pain.

Contemplate: Go to Bethlehem in your contemplation of this birthing scene. Are you under the stars or sheltered by some rough dwelling? Do you help, or are you even more frightened than Joseph? Speak to these new parents. What do you want to say? How do they respond to you?

We do know that it was night when Mary gave birth, which only heightened the terror. No florescent lights in a sterile hospital, no midwife, no mother at her side, no former experience to ease her fright. This was her firstborn child.

Pray: Mother, our mother, comfort all mothers, those giving birth, those struggling with their children, those burying their children. Encourage all mothers whose life seems like night, without hope.

Suddenly there was an onrush of shepherds into Mary and Joseph's silent soothing of the infant.

Fourth Pericope

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." . . . When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:8–20

Shepherds were considered outcasts by the religious authorities, ritually unclean because of their work, for no one could imagine a shepherd not rustling a lost sheep into his own flock. These unwanted guests, poor, outcast, and probably smelly and noisy, arrived. No wealthy wise men as in Matthew's account, but those scorned by religious society hurried to greet the baby lying in a manger and his stunned and weary parents. Mary heard their experience of angels, and "*pondered all these things in her heart.*"

Wonder, Contemplate: Enter this scene with empathy. In the pitch dark, hear the clamor coming nearer. Smell the unwashed bodies. How does Joseph react? How is Mary feeling? With whom do you identify? When you are afraid, do you react with defensiveness and anger, as Joseph might have? Do you withdraw, as Mary might have at first? How do you work through your fears of those in our society who are different, who are marginalized? Share your ponderings with Mary and Joseph as the newborn falls back to sleep. Maybe you would like to rock him as you speak about fear with the new parents.

Recall that in Luke's story, Mary and Joseph are from Nazareth—they are far from home. Somehow the family must have eventually found shelter in Bethlehem, because eight days after his birth in Luke's

account, Jesus was circumcised and named, most likely by his father.

Pray: Joseph, as once you protected the infant, protect us, the church, his body. Shelter all women and children who are frightened, abused, misused.

Luke next portrays the couple following the Law of Moses forty days later, presenting their firstborn in the Temple and offering a sacrifice of birds, the donation of the poor.

Fifth Pericope

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon. He was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 2:25

Contrary to much art, nothing in the text indicates that Simeon was either a priest or elderly. He was probably a layman, gifted with prophecy that both comforts and challenges.

It had been revealed to him [Simeon] by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him

in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother 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 thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Luke 2:26–35

The Greek word in the text that is translated as “soul” is *psyche*. Is this why Mary, with her heart, her *psyche*, split wide open, will be trusted by those who are heartbroken through the ages?

Reflect, Dialogue: To whom have you turned when your heart was breaking? Could you turn to Mary? Try it. Share one of your sorrows with her, and ask if she ever experienced anything like that. Listen.

Luke concludes the Temple scene with the arrival of the eighty-four-year-old Anna, who joined the chorus, and with shepherds and Simeon, told everyone

about the baby. Where did Luke get that age for her? It may be important to notice her age if we are to think of Mary growing into old age. *“And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, being filled with wisdom and the grace of God”* (Lk 2:40).

This saying about wisdom and grace in Luke 2:40 is repeated in the last verse of the infancy narratives: *“And Jesus increased in wisdom and age and grace before God and people”* (Lk 2:52). If Jesus grew in wisdom and grace, so did Mary. She was hailed as full of grace by the angel Gabriel, but imagine how much her capacity for grace, God’s own life within her, grew in those months of bearing, delivering, and caring for her infant son. She was full of wisdom, as full as a young mother can be, but how much more her capacity for wisdom increased through pondering all things, joys and sorrows, successes and mistakes, in her heart. She would be full of wisdom and grace too at pentecost, with greater capacity, and with more growth in God’s life as she aged.

Reflect: And you? How have you been growing in wisdom and grace? What deepens and expands your capacity for God’s life within you? When you reflect on your various experiences, how does God’s wisdom shape your thinking and feeling? Tell God what you want.

Between the two assertions that Jesus grew in wisdom and grace, Luke paints a scene of Mary and Joseph stricken by painful anxiety. Jesus was lost to them as a twelve-year-old, alone in a strange city.

Sixth Pericope

When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to 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. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things

in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

Luke 2:43–52

In his own eyes Jesus was not at all lost, but right where he belonged. When his parents in their acute anxiety found him, listening to the teachers and asking them questions, he made a small protest, but went home with them to Nazareth. Still, Mary and Joseph's "*not understanding the saying which he spoke to them*" (Lk 2:50) and insisting on his returning home may well have saved us all from one more Doctor of the Law! Instead of staying on studying Law and haggling over jots and tittles, Jesus' obedience led him later to attend to the needs of his people.

Reflect, Dialogue: When have you suffered anxiety like Mary's, she who is like us in all things? What or whom did you lose? For how long? Can you remember the feelings? Ask the Spirit to call them to mind so that you can share your feelings with Mary and so grow closer to her.

Mary was a real woman. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we see that Mary is one of us, human, like us in all things. In Luke her humanity is more graphic: birthing homeless and on the road, sweating with panic when Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, crying tears

of joy to be with Joseph and Elizabeth, crying tears of confusion and sadness when listening to Simeon.

Reflect, Dialogue: If you have ever said to God: “Be it done to me according to your will,” what has happened to you? Where have the pain, the anxiety, the sharp grief or the dull sadness been in your life? Can you talk over these emotions with Mary? Where have the joy, deep peace, loving relationships, growing in wisdom and grace, drawing closer to God been in your life? These too are God’s will. Can you talk over these experiences with Mary? Try it.

THE CROSS

We might wonder at Mary’s absence from the cross in this gospel. If Mary had been historically, factually, at the cross, would it not have been likely that Luke would have placed her there? Since Luke honors her as a faithful and obedient servant in his first two chapters, he would be the one to assure us that she was faithfully following her son to his execution. He does not.

Pray: Mary, thank you for suffering such anxiety, and yet growing in wisdom and grace through it all. Whether you were at the cross at the end does not matter so much as your presence in the lives of all those “crucified” by war, poverty, and hunger in our world today. Tend our suffering brothers

and sisters, we beg you. Comfort all parents whose children are lost to them.

MARY AND JESUS' MINISTRY

There are two references in Luke to Mary during Jesus' ministry. In Luke 8:19–21, after the parable about the word of God as seed sown, some sprouting quickly and dying, and some falling on good soil, growing and producing, Mary and Jesus' brothers come to him. However, unlike in Mark, they do not necessarily think Jesus is out of his mind.

Seventh Pericope

Then his mother and brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Luke 8:19–21

Jesus has just explained the parable of the sower and seed to his disciples, concluding with the meaning of the good soil: *"these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."* He then cautions, *"Pay*

attention to how you listen . . ." (Lk 8:18). From his first chapter, Luke has portrayed Mary as the listener *par excellence*. "Be it done to me according to your word." She is, as scripture scholar Raymond Brown titles her, the first disciple. A disciple is, literally, one who learns (from the Latin, *discipulus/a*). Luke shows Mary not only listening but also pondering, treasuring, thinking through everything in her heart. She, the good soil in which the Word could grow, also has held the word of God "fast in an honest and good heart."

Pray: Open our hearts to receive your word, Jesus. Make us fertile soil, bearing fruit. Keep expanding our hearts in love, we pray.

Eighth Pericope

A woman in the crowd lifted her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked." But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it."

Luke 11:27–28

What a marvel that a woman would be seen in public in that milieu, and that she would dare to speak in public to a man—both taboos taught by her religious leaders. Jesus, however, broke that "law" again and again, speaking with and listening to women.

One wonders how he learned to relate so freely, easily, mutually, and sensitively with women—and what part his mother played in that ease with women.

Jesus gently challenged this woman, however, as he continues to challenge us today, not to reverence physical motherhood for its own sake any more than physical virginity. Mary has heard and kept the word of God. Luke has again and again painted in story form Mary's usual response to hearing the word of God as keeping, pondering, treasuring the word of God. Whether the word of God came through an angel, or Elizabeth, or outcast shepherds, or Simeon and Anna, or even her son about his Father's business, "*His mother carefully kept all these matters in her heart*" (Lk 2:51). In his infancy narratives Luke has set the stage for Mary as the first true disciple, always learning from God's word and from her own heart-felt pondering of events.

Pray: Mary, wise woman, teach us too to keep all our experiences carefully in our hearts, learning wisdom from our reflection on them and prayer about them. Thank you for your constant willingness to accept the joys and sorrows, whatever life brought you. Thank you for your listening love, and your long, loving gaze on everything.

THE UPPER ROOM AND THE REFUGE OF SINNERS

In his final chapter of the gospel, Luke may have placed an indirect reference to Mary. It is the scene in which the disciples return from the road to Emmaus and proclaim that they have encountered the risen Lord (Lk 24:33). In that scene, Luke states that the travelers return to Jerusalem and find the eleven and their companions in the upper room. Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke names Mary as one of the companions who was present in the same upper room during the experience of pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples. Let us examine that upper room and its inhabitants on the night of the Resurrection. It may be that what is narrated in Luke 24 included Mary.

Ninth Pericope

“That same hour, they [the disciples who recognized Jesus is the breaking of the bread] got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together” (Lk 24:23). They shared their experience on the road when “Jesus himself stood in the midst of them.” They all were troubled. Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Lk 24:45). In a strangely passive voice, he next told them that “in his name, repentance leading to forgiveness

should be proclaimed to all nations. . . . You are witnesses. . . . Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you, but you sit in the city until you are clothed with power [dynamis] from on high" (Lk 24:47–49).

Who are the “*companions gathered together*” on Easter night? On Easter morning, “*Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women*” who saw the empty tomb are named (Lk 24:10). Surely these women are among the “*companions.*” Was Mary of Nazareth there as well? Because Luke, in his second volume, places her in the upper room on Pentecost (Acts 1:14), Mary was possibly in that upper room on Easter night. She would have then been among those whom Jesus commissioned to preach repentance leading to forgiveness. Was Mary missioned to be “*refuge of sinners*”? That title of Mary’s has provided consolation to believers for two millennia.

Reflect, Dialogue: When you sin, and recognize sin as sin, where or to whom do you turn? Have you ever come to Mary to confess, to be listened to without judgment, to be embraced as a loved sinner? If there is some sin, fault, weakness, character defect that troubles you, share it with Mary now. Listen. Then notice how you feel.

“The eleven and their companions gathered together” (Lk 24:23) are named in Acts of the Apostles, Luke’s

second volume: Mary, the women and brothers, the Eleven—120 in all (Acts 1:14–15). After Jesus was taken up, that 120 worshipped in the Temple (Lk 24:52), but they seemed to live in that upper room (Acts 1:13).

Contemplate: See, hear, smell. Join Mary in the upper room as Luke concludes his gospel. When Jesus stands in the midst of the room, watch her. Is she troubled? How does she feel? What is it like for her to hear her son explain the scriptures? What does she make of this mission that they all receive: to proclaim repentance and forgiveness? Ask her how she will obey Jesus' commission. Listen.

Communal Prayer: Mary, thank you for offering us your motherly and unconditional love, especially when we are overcome by sin and guilt. Thank you for being such a faithful disciple, for growing in wisdom and grace. Thank you for continuing your mission, helping us to repent and come again and again to the one who embodies God's mercy, Jesus.

Community Sharing: In this chapter, what attracted you? What puzzled you? What affirmed your experience? What challenged or stretched it?