



First United Methodist Church of Hanford

Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.



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GPS GUIDE Grow, Pray, Serve Guide for Weekly Reflection

(Adapted from United Methodist Church of the Resurrection resources: sharechurch.com)

December 8, 2024 *There's Something About Mary*

Matthew 1:18 (CEB), Luke 1:26b-31, 34-35, 38 (CEB)

Pregnant—by the Holy Spirit

MONDAY 12.9.24 Matthew 1:18

One notable aspect of Matthew's report of what led to Jesus' birth is how matter-of-fact verse 18 was. There were other "Biblical accounts of God empowering supernatural births in the OT ([Genesis 21:1–2](#); [25:21](#); [30:22](#); [Judges 13:3](#)). Even among miraculous births, however, God does something new: Jesus is born not merely from someone previously unable to bear, but from a virgin." * There was no

reason for Matthew to describe such a unique event so briefly except that he believed it. • Matthew

seems to have chosen his language with great care. "Matthew's wording doesn't refer to the Spirit's taking the role of a male in a sexual encounter. Instead, Matthew refers to the unexplainable exercise of God's creative power. Clearly, Joseph isn't Jesus' biological father (see [Matthew 1:25](#))." ** You may choose not to believe in God at all. But if you believe God created all that exists, and that Jesus died and rose again, why would you find this story difficult to believe?

- Some skeptics say, "So what? The Greeks had myths about gods getting women pregnant." But those were very different from Matthew's account. "In the Greek stories, the gods are many, are immoral, and impregnate women who are thus not virgins." ** Does the uniqueness of Matthew's simple, straightforward account make it easier or harder for you to trust it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the story of your conception is mysterious, as are other parts of your life. I see that as showing that, as God, you are vastly different from a mere mortal like me, and I should expect the unexplainable from you. Amen.

* NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (p. 8374). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

** Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 1:18 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 6 NT.

*** NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (p. 8374). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Mary Heard Prophecies About Jesus' Difficult Path

TUESDAY 12.10.24 Luke 2:22-38

Why did Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple for “ritual cleansing”? They were devout Jews. “Childbearing wasn’t a sin, but the ritual impurity resulting from it required an offering ([Leviticus 12:6-8](#)). After the 33 days are up, Mary offers a pair of birds, the animal sacrifice the poor could give ([Leviticus 12:8](#)).” * Their offering of the alternate sacrifice available for the poor is another detail that reminds us of the humble circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth.

- Simeon, devout and aged, amazed Joseph and Mary. “Simeon’s prophecy, composed largely of allusions to Isaiah 40-55, is remarkable for two things: it forecasts the universal mission of Jesus (he is to be ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles’) and it predicts the stormy, uneasy nature of the mission, including the pain that will pierce the soul of Mary herself when Jesus is crucified.” ** Sometimes we want festivity to be all there is to Christmas. Would Simeon’s words spoil that?
- Young parents, baby in arms, met two old people nearing the end of their lives. “We have the old man and woman, waiting their turn to die, worshipping God night and day and praying for the salvation of his people. Luke wants to draw readers of every age and stage of life into his picture. No matter who or where you are, the story of Jesus, from the feeding-trough in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story.” *** Are you open to making it your story this Advent?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Simeon sensed the raw courage you showed in coming into a world that would too often reject and hate you. Thank you for the steely love you had from the moment you entered our broken world. Amen.

* Richard B. Vinson, study note on Luke 2:24 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 110 NT. ** John Killinger, *A Devotional Guide to Luke: The Gospel of Contagious Joy*. Word Books, 1981, p. 23. *** Wright, N. T., *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone Book 4) (p. 27). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Mary's Journey from Mother to Disciple

WEDNESDAY 12.11.24 Mark 3:21, 31-34

Jesus should have had a perfect family life, right? But at least one time Jesus' mother and brothers tried to alter how he went about his mission. The religious leaders who claimed Jesus was in league with the ruler of demons may have influenced them. Jesus was loyal to his family (cf. [John 2:1-2, 12](#)), but ultimately loyal to God’s mission. Jesus’ example reminds us that if we must choose, our highest loyalty is to God and the person God made us to be, even beyond our family.

- “Despite what pious Christian traditions have at times said about Mary, Jesus’ mother, at this stage at least she clearly didn’t have any idea what he was up to. She had brought the rest of the family... to take him away, to stop him behaving in such an outrageous fashion, bringing dishonor to the family name. They thought he was mad.... [Jesus] has a different vocation, a different mission.” * What made it important for Mary to move spiritually from “mother” to “disciple”?
- Jesus did not “disown” his human family or sever all connections. Far from it (cf. [1 Corinthians 15:7](#), about his brother). But he meant it when he used family language to describe his bond with all of those who do God’s will, and Mary needed to grasp that. Psychologists say people who follow their highest values, even if those upset others, are “inner-directed.” Why did Jesus have to be inner-directed to carry out his mission? When have spiritual “family members” blessed you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you lived through the pain of misunderstandings and the beauty of caring and loving. Shape me into a person who maximizes the beauty of all the relationships I’m a part of. Amen.

* Wright, N. T., *Mark for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone Book 3) (p. 39). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Mary Faced Her Neighbors' Doubts

THURSDAY 12.12.24 Matthew 13:54-57

Due to centuries of Christian tradition, we sometimes assume that Jesus and his family always had haloes around their heads, clearly superior to everyone else. But that would not have fit with the reality of Jesus' mission (cf. [Philippians 2:5-8](#)). In fact, when Jesus went to his hometown, many people responded by saying, in effect, “Who does he think he is? We know his mother and

brothers— they’re nothing special.” That must have pained Mary as much or more than it did Jesus. •

“Those in the synagogue name Jesus’ family as proof that he isn’t anyone special. Recall that status in the ancient world was based less on one’s accomplishments and more on one’s family roots.” * If you were God, would you choose to come as the Messiah to a family as poor and “ordinary” as Mary and Joseph’s, rather than to a prominent, powerful, highly respected and respectable family? What are some of the key ways God’s values challenge yours?

- “Matthew places this incident right after the long series of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom, and it’s a stark warning to anyone who might suppose that Jesus’ teaching was meant to be a matter of simple and straightforward lessons about life, morality, spirituality or whatever, that anyone with half a brain would pick up easily. Far from it. This ‘teaching’, if we want to call it that, is shocking, explosive and dangerous.” ** In what ways has Jesus' message had an “explosive” effect on you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your servant John Ortberg wrote the shocking sentence, “Jesus was not a great man.” *** He wasn’t insulting you but reflecting how you change our ideas of true greatness. Change

any of mine that don't fit in your kingdom. Amen.

* Eugene Eung-Chun Park and Joel B. Green, study note on Matthew 13:55 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 32 NT.

** Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 179). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

*** Ortberg, John, *Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus* (p. 74). HarperCollins Christian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Mary Stayed Until the Very End

FRIDAY 12.13.24 Matthew 27:55-61

The crucifixion was over; Jesus was dead. We now call that day “Good Friday,” but there was nothing about it that felt good to Jesus' followers as it happened. The boastful male disciples (cf. [Matthew 26:35](#)) had all faded into hiding. But many of the women were still there, almost certainly including Jesus' mother Mary. ([Matthew 13:55](#) said she had sons named James and Joseph.) She had

accepted God's call to bring Jesus into the world—she wasn't going to quit now. • Many tried hard to refute Christians' claims that Jesus rose from the dead. “He wasn't really dead,

they said. Or maybe the disciples stole the body. Or maybe someone else did. Or perhaps the women went to the wrong tomb. These were all stock answers to the early Christian message.” *

But Matthew recorded that the women saw exactly where Jesus' body was placed. How did the women's dogged fortitude contradict in advance the claim that they went to the wrong tomb?

- Dorothy Sayers, the first woman to earn an Oxford degree and a loyal Christ follower, explained why Jesus won women's loyalty. He was “a prophet and teacher who never nagged at [women]; never flattered or coaxed or patronized... who rebuked without [demeaning] and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them... who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend.” ** How does that illuminate why Resurrection joyously has female and male clergy working together?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we're “enlightened,” but we still too often hear jokes about women's driving or emotionalism. Guide me to discern and live beyond hurtful gender or other stereotypes, as you did. Amen.

* Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 194). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

** Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human? Penetrating, Sensible, and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, p. 68.

Cross to Upper Room: Last recorded steps of Mary's Journey

SATURDAY 12.14.24 John 19:25-27, Acts 1:9-14

Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her heart (cf. [Luke 2:34-35](#)), which came horribly true as she lovingly, loyally stayed at the cross. And dying on the cross, Jesus was loyal to her. "When Jesus saw his mother, he could not but think of the days ahead. He could not commit her to the care of his brothers, for they did not believe in him yet ([John 7:5](#))....So Jesus committed Mary to John's care and John to Mary's, so that they should comfort each other's loneliness when he was gone. There is something infinitely moving in the fact that Jesus in the agony of the Cross, when the salvation of the world hung in the balance, thought of the loneliness of his mother in the days ahead." * And she was not left alone. Acts 1:14 was the last mention of Mary in Scripture. Christian tradition said that at some point after this she and the Apostle John, her protector, moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus.

How lovely that this last mention showed Mary in a circle of disciples committed to prayer! • Some in Jesus' day dodged responsibility for helping parents (especially mothers) by pledging to

give their goods to God later. Jesus sternly rebuked that kind of fake piety (cf. [Matthew 15:3-9](#)). Even in extreme pain, he "walked his talk" by making sure someone he trusted would care for his mother. How do you think Jesus' return to heaven felt to his mother? How could the promise of his return have comforted her deeply, in ways that went beyond its importance for all his followers? What might Mary, the apostles, Jesus' brothers and the other women have prayed about?

- Few of us in our death-denying society want to think about our mortality, and we often put off making a will or other end-of-life provisions. Are you willing to conquer your discomfort to help any who depend on you, or might need to care for you if you became ill? If you haven't already, make plans that will help your family when you are going or gone. For help, there are quality resources at www.caringinfo.org.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Mary's life journey tested her, and she stayed with you and with your followers. Let her example inspire me to the same kind of determined faithfulness she showed. Amen.

* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John—Volume 2 Chapters 8–21 (Revised Edition)*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1976, page 257.