

Advent Study

Missing Mary: A Protestant Perspective on
the Mother of Jesus

Jane Sweet

Author's notes:

As I was packing to move from the home in which we lived for twenty years, I found an old, dusty box of family pictures. When I opened the lid, I discovered a postcard I had searched for years ago and thought was gone. It was a picture of a very pregnant Mary, Mother of Jesus. On the back I read that it was a fresco by an artist named Ben Long. He had named the fresco “Mary, Great with Child”. It was in St. Mary’s Episcopal Church located in West Jefferson, North Carolina. Ironically, my husband and I had planned a vacation in that area the next week! Finding the postcard in this timely way made me think that I had received a nudge from God. During our car trip the next week, we found a small, white church filled with three large frescoes, one being “Mary, Great with Child.” In the dim light of the sanctuary, I stood in front of the life size fresco and heard myself asking her, “Mary, where have you been in my Protestant faith?” For many years I have spent time in Catholic retreat centers and churches in the United States. When on retreats, I saw beautiful statues and paintings of Mary and felt reverence in the presence of

them. I realized I missed seeing Mary in artwork throughout Protestant churches where I worship. It might be interesting for you to look around your Protestant church and ask, “Is Mary missing?”

Preface:

A meaningful time to study Mary, Mother of Jesus is during advent. You are invited to read biblical passages on Mary, reflect on the scripture, meditate, and understand how the biblical words and Mary's faith relate to us in our daily lives. We will read Mary's experience of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* and the *New International Version of the Bible*.

My personal contributions to this study come from a question my spiritual advisor asked me when I told her I was stuck on parts of this writing. She asked me, "Have you been to Israel?" I answered, "Yes." Then, she said, "Write from your personal experience of the trip." I was embarrassed that I missed the obvious. I had been to Nazareth, home of Mary, I had been to the birthplace of Jesus, in Bethlehem, and I had seen what Mary and Jesus may have also seen. Upon reflection, I realized I was trying to keep myself out of the story. However, this is impossible due to my many life experiences and training that I have had.

Which in many cases involve lessons I have learned from Mary. Here was the spiritual director's last eye opening statement. She said to me, "God has been waiting for you to find the postcard of the pregnant Mary." That statement sent chills up my spine and I felt tearful. God was waiting for me. This new thought resonated through my body and mind and gave me a new perspective on my relationship with God.

Mary may be the most recognized woman in the world, yet most Protestants do not have a picture of her in their church let alone study her. Mary's complete trust in God is so difficult to describe because words don't have enough meaning and power to do so.

Stop! Reread the above paragraph. Why did the Protestant churches minimize the focus on Jesus' mother?

Scholars suggest that in an attempt for the Protestant faith to differentiate from the Roman Catholics, we do not see her as one to whom we can pray to, through, with, or connect with through prayer. Therefore, many Protestant churches have ignored her importance.

Mary teaches us life lessons: how to say yes to God and life, how to wait patiently, and how to deeply love each other and ourselves. Read and study, and maybe while unaware Mary- Mother of Jesus- has already been teaching us. Mary is the first teacher in our Christian faith. She taught Jesus. It makes me wonder if God's lessons are imprinted in our DNA only to be brought forth by life experiences and developed individually when the time has come.

This study invites you to be a companion, sister, brother, or daughter of our beloved Mary during the pregnancy and birth of her son- Jesus Christ.

SESSION ONE: SAYING YES TO GOD

Of course, it is possible for God to have a Son of a woman “in a different people in a different time”-but that son wouldn’t be Jesus, for Jesus was Mary’s son as well as God’s—which lottsa people tend to forget at times.

For all I know- for all anybody knows-God may have “proposed” (or propositioned?) ...through the ages but, as far as we know, Mary was the first one to say an unqualified “yes”...

*“When the time had come,”
...and the “Time had fully come” only because the woman Mary said “yes.”*

Abbie Jane Wells
(The Gospel According to Abbie Jane Wells)

Introduction:

Mary of Nazareth, mother-to-be of Jesus, was a young Jewish woman of fifteen or sixteen and lived a modest life in the poor village of Nazareth. In that time, women spent their days cooking, fetching water at the well, grinding barley for bread making, tending a small garden, watching over children and being responsible for their children's religious education.

When Mary was still a young girl, she was approached by Gabriel- an angel sent from God- to tell her she would give birth to a son and he would be called Jesus.

The story is best read as written in the Bible from Luke 1: 26-38:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this

might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Soren Kierkegaard, in his book *Mary, Four Weeks with the Mother of Jesus*, writes the following:

Mary's response is the most momentous, the most decisive yes in the history of the world. Mary's yes comes, not from just an enthusiastic and joyful heart, but from her whole heart, soul, mind and powers."

Can you imagine receiving a message like Gabriel's? All at once, she heard an angel speaking, and the angel said she was to have a baby. Then the angel announced that the baby was going to be Jesus! Furthermore, the angel said that she should not be afraid!

This biblical passage is one of the most important in the Bible, in my opinion. Mary said "yes." It shows absolute trust that something good was going to happen, not only to her, but to the rest of the world as well. Mary shows us how to receive God's love with full confidence. Also, let us remember that not only did Mary say "yes," but Joseph did also. In the book of Matthew- one of the two Gospels in which Jesus' birth story is told- it is written that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said for him

not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife. The angel told him that what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit (Mt.1: 20).

In my life, I have debated whether or not to say “yes”. Many would say that this act of questioning derives from a lack of faith. Though that may be true, we may need to practice saying yes in small things in order to build up to the big ones. However, for me, I was in prayer about a big decision and realized that I was debating in my mind whether or not I could accept an answer from God. Thoughts like, “What if I don’t like the answer?” would fill my mind- they often overwhelmed me with stress and anxiety. The more anxiety I had the less open I could be to God. My nerves made me feel as though choices were closing in on me. Making a medical decision concerning cancer treatment was a decision that seemed to me to be a matter of life or death. And God being God, knowing of my struggle, provided a suggestion to help me make the life-saving decision. I heard a voice in the night that repeatedly said, “Read some more” until the voice was so loud and I sat up in bed looking around for someone. Of

course, no one was there. I got up and walked around the bedroom pondering what had just happened when I noticed a book that a friend had sent that I had not read. I opened the book to find information on cancer research, and I sat down and read some more to find my answer on treatments. I said yes! Not only does God provide answers, but speaks to each of us in ways we can understand. I am known affectionately by my friends as a medical researcher, so of course God had me reading medical research literature. Fortunately, God did not let me struggle with the question in my mind very long. The chapter I needed to read fell open to me. God just takes care of these things. Perhaps, this has happened to you.

The fact that Mary said “yes” without hesitation has always impressed me; her response has been an inspiration to hang on when times are tough. In the face of social rejection and overwhelming fear, her prevailing faith allowed her to persevere. Our hope is that in time we too can say, with trust, a big “yes”.

Please note that biblical scholars and others have discussed the meaning of the

word “virgin” birth for two thousand years. What we know for sure is that Mary and Joseph said “yes”; their confirmation of God’s call is the bedrock upon which Jesus built his ministry and changed the world.

Reflections:

1. We are encouraged to follow the model of Mary by saying “yes” to God in our daily lives. Take some time to remember your opportunities to say “yes.” How was that experience for you?
2. If you are comfortable with the idea, I invite you to remember the “angels” who have appeared in your life. Be grateful to your angels once again.
3. How would you have responded to Gabriel’s message to Mary?

Prayer:

“Mary, virgin and mother,
you who, moved by the spirit,
welcomed the word of life in the depths
of your humble faith:
as you gave yourself so completely
to the external one,
help us to say our own “yes”
to the call to proclaim
the good news of Jesus.”

Pope Francis
(The Joy of the Gospel)

Meditation:

Sit quietly in the presence of God for five minutes. Let your mind rest by noticing your breath moving in and out, the spirit of God, filling you with peace. When your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to your breath.

SESSION TWO: WAITING

*The Spiritual life is a life
in which we wait,
actively present to the
moment, trusting new
things will happen to us,
new things that are
far beyond our
imagination, fantasy or
prediction.*

Henri Nouwen
“Waiting for God”
(*Watch for the Light*)

Introduction:

How many times have you heard people speak of waiting with negativity and frustration? We are waiting to get well, waiting for a new job, waiting for retirement, and waiting for a relationship to change. We are mostly waiting in fear and anxiety with apprehension. We are a “hurry up” society full of impatience. Our advances in technology support the concept that

modern society is so heavily focused on immediacy.

In the book, *When the Heart Waits*, Sue Monk Kidd writes, “I’m not referring to waiting as we’re accustomed to it, but waiting as the passionate and contemplative crucible in which new life and spiritual wholeness can be birthed.” This type of waiting is a new twist on the word! She thinks that this form of waiting is full of expectation, positive movement, and a mind change that turns passive waiting into active waiting.

As we discussed in Session One, Mary’s response to the angel, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said,” demonstrates her absolute trust that she would be safe in delivering a healthy baby.

When examining Mary’s manner of waiting, it is necessary to notice not only what she said, but also what she did. As written in the Bible, Mary went to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant. The trip to Ein Karen, four miles from Bethlehem, took about nine days. This was not an easy trip for any traveler of the time. The paths worn by foot and donkey

travelers were full of stones. Mary's need for support must have been of utmost importance to make that long trip. Earlier in the story, an angel told Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, that his barren wife would become pregnant (Lk. 1:1-14). The two pregnant women found comfort when they were together.

We know from scripture that Mary was warmly received by her family. Elizabeth was honored to see Mary and exclaimed, *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished”* (Lk. 1:42, 45).

Elizabeth trusted God's plan for Mary and let Mary know immediately that she will wait in faith with her. It is important to remember to gather support around us when we are waiting.

During this biblical period, there were major cultural and social differences between the two women. A pregnant, unmarried woman was not accepted in their culture. That situation would be dealt with by stoning the pregnant woman (Deut.

22:20-21). Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, and although Mary was pledged to Joseph, they were not married. However, Joseph chose to accept Mary's pregnancy and trust that God would provide (Mt. 1:18-25).

Mary's faith and patience were steadfast even in the midst of societal rejection. Her time waiting with cousin Elizabeth gave her support during the months of pregnancy.

Astonishing! These two modest and faithful Jewish women would have babies to be named Jesus and John (the Baptist) who would change the world. They joyfully and faithfully waited together for the births. There is no mention in the scriptures of any remorse, fear, anxiety, or frustration. It appears from writings that the women were delighted to be together. They were truly present to their lives- not looking backward with "what if's" or projecting forward with anxieties. Again we learn a lesson on how Mary patiently waited. She lived minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day. Current language calls this lifestyle "living mindfully." Is it possible that we could learn to live the same way?

When I had cancer early in my life, I had a young family and a supportive, loving husband. I had a choice: I could live in fear and project negatively into the future, or with God's help, learn to live here and now in my life. At that point, I decided that I did not want to miss a moment with my family, and I learned to be actively present through the grace of God. When thinking negative thoughts, I learned to catch myself and replace the thought with a song or a prayer that I had memorized. This technique refocused my thoughts, kept me in the present moment, and helped me feel more in control of my perspective- which calmed me. I learned to live trusting God would be with me through whatever happened. I changed locations while waiting for a biopsy report. I visited friends. In retrospect, I asked myself where I learned that discipline. As I said earlier in the study, Mary is our first teacher.

Mary demonstrates how to trust gracefully in God, gathers support by going to be with her cousin Elizabeth, and lives in the present. As Christians, we have a community which encourages us to invite others to support us while we wait. If we

falter in our trust, the prayers of others will hold us steady.

For the sake of Biblical history let us take a moment to read Mary's response to the warm welcome she received from Elizabeth. It is called "Mary's Song" or "The Magnificat." Parts of this passage are used in song and prayer frequently:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant,

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

For the Mighty One has done great things for me-holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

(Lk. 1:46-55).

Reflections:

1. How do you wait? Do you wait in peace calmly, or wait while distracted, fearful and restless?
2. Do you gather support around you while waiting? Have you practiced mindfulness by living in the moment?
3. Are there times when you are the person who supports others waiting? Ponder how you participate in waiting with others. As an experiment this week, try waiting patiently for someone or something and notice how that feels to you.

4. Do you find prayer for yourself or others helps with waiting?

Prayer:

Come, Lord,
and help us
to open our hearts and minds
to new ways of waiting
with trust and love,
and a calm body, mind, and spirit.
Help us
to tenderly hold our fears and anxieties
knowing that your love for us
will prevail in all circumstances.
As we wait this Advent season,
we remember and wait with Mary
with loving kindness
toward Mary, others, and ourselves. Amen.

Meditation:

Sit quietly in the presence of God for five minutes. As you breathe the spirit in and slowly out, visualize being surrounded by those who love you and comfort you. Hold that image in your mind and breathe slowly

in and out. Know deeply that God loves you
and waits with you.

SESSION THREE: LOVING

No one has ever seen God: but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

(1Jn. 4:12).

Introduction:

Mary, mother to be of Jesus, was fully nine months pregnant. It is thought that she was in Nazareth having lived with her cousin Elizabeth for several months in Judea. A decree was issued from Caesar Augustus that a census would be taken of the entire Roman empire. Joseph belonged to the house and line of David so he needed to return to Bethlehem, considered the town of David.

It was over ninety-five miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Winter brought colder temperatures and shorter daylight hours. The rocky, dirt road beaten down by human and animal footprints stood between them and their destination. The trip was moderately difficult for men and even more so for a pregnant woman about to give birth.

Imagine for just a minute what the news of the census meant to Mary. She had to either walk or ride a donkey on a long and arduous trip, she had to leave behind her friends and family and give birth by herself, and she must have wondered where she would be when the time came to give birth. And yet, the scriptures do not mention that Mary had any apprehension about the journey to Bethlehem. The same steady faith and trust in God that carried her through her months of pregnancy would carry her through the birth of her baby.

There is this short account of the birth:

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 room for them at the inn (Lk. 2:6-7).

Just two verses- forty-four words- represent the Birth of the Son of God.

They were quietly attending their new baby knowing that they were told by God that Jesus was to be his name. That dark, cold night in a manger they became parents

of Jesus who was unknown to the world. However, in time he would offer a world change never known prior to that night. Truly, it is a magnificent story.

Approximately two thousand years after the birth of Christ, I joined a line alongside other pilgrims to visit the birthplace of Jesus. We walked down a dark staircase to the place where Jesus was reportedly born. I stood silently in the back of the cave-like room. The ancient red oil lamps were hanging down casting a smoky, soft flickering light over the scene. The air was thick with the smell of burning oil. We stood silently and gazed at the gold star on the floor marking the birth spot of Jesus.

An older lady who appeared quite fragile got down on her knees to kiss the star on the floor. She prayed in that position for a few minutes and then struggled to stand. As she slowly left the room, her dark face revealed itself under a bit of light from the hanging lamp. Her face appeared relaxed, peaceful, and full of love. Looking at her glowing face, I felt connected to all the strangers in the room if not the world. The whole story of Jesus' birth became somewhat

understandable. I saw love in her face and I felt love for others. God's love of Mary and Mary's love of God was where the miracle first started with the Annunciation- the announcement from the angel Gabriel to Mary. Jesus was born out of this love and into a world in need of a reassuring, abundant, and unconditional love.

He was considered radical in his time because of his many demonstrations of what this unconditional love looked like. All of humankind can become radical lovers and bridge our many differences through acceptance and a love so immense that it not only changes us, but also the world.

Perhaps, this is the longing in my heart and maybe other Protestants: a desire to remember Mary as the teenager who loved beyond all boundaries and as a mother who loved her son and loves us right now as we are. Each Advent season we are invited to remember our birthright. You are God's beloved one. Yes, God loves you unconditionally.

Go forth now knowing this Advent that you are wrapped in cloths and gently laid in

a manger by our faithful and loving Mary, mother of Jesus.

Reflections:

1. How have you experienced Mary, the mother of Jesus? Perhaps, she has been a visual image, perhaps a woman of faith whom you remember from bible stories, or maybe you have experienced her in a vision, prayer or dream.
2. Spend some time wandering around your church during Advent. See what you can find visually and/or in other ways that seem to speak to you about this faithful Mother to all.
3. Option: Catholic prayer below can be prayed as a group or individually.

Prayer:

Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Janice T. Connell
Praying with Mary

Meditation:

As a group, sit quietly for 10 minutes. Your leader will watch the clock. Notice your breath as you breathe in and out. Imagine God's healing and loving light filling you with abundant love. Sit with that image in your mind's eye for a while and then let it go. Notice your breath again.

At the end of 10 minutes your leader will say Amen. Please leave in silence and keep the silence as long as possible depending on your circumstances.

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