

Where's Mary?

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In October I preached an Ask Me Anything sermon where you came up with questions about God, the Church, and theological topics. One of the questions that wasn't chosen at the time was about Mary. The question was: "Where is Mary? As a former Catholic, I wonder why she seems to be cast aside by the Protestant faith. She is prominent in the birth story, but beyond that, you hear very little about her in Jesus' life."

It's a great question. And since we just heard the Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke—let's talk about Mary on this last Sunday of Advent. Who was she? Where is she in the Bible? And how do we understand how Roman Catholics view Mary versus how Protestants view Mary?

Here's what we know about Mary: she was Jewish, she was poor, and she was young when Jesus was born. It's always worth reminding ourselves that Mary and Joseph were Jewish and Jesus was Jewish and all the earliest disciples were Jewish as well. The Gospel of Luke shares that Mary lived in Nazareth where Jesus eventually grew up. Nazareth was a hill-town in the middle of nowhere, it's not even mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures! There were anywhere from 400-2,000 people who lived in that town and they were mostly day laborers and farmers. Jesus was probably part of the laboring class with his family. So Mary was Jewish and came from humble roots in Nazareth. Her sons and daughters (yes she had more children than just Jesus) grew up in this context.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed to each other when Mary gets pregnant, and the age of betrothal was 12.5 years old. Matthew tells us about Mary's pregnancy by writing, "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."^[1] The Greek word we translate into English as “virgin” (parthenos) can also mean young woman or maiden, as in someone of child-bearing age who wasn't married yet. Mary was young when she gives birth to her oldest child—Jesus. From a historical context, it's impossible to verify the miracle of the Virgin Birth. That's why we can say for sure that Mary was Jewish, poor, and young but it becomes a matter of faith/belief/trust as to how we understand the circumstances that led to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Alright, so that's a bit about who Mary was historically. Let's move into where else we see Mary in the Bible. Protestants always talk about Mary in Advent and on Christmas Eve, of course. We also speak about her during Holy Week as Mary stood at the foot of Jesus' cross. There's a few other times when Mary makes an appearance in the lectionary. Mary understandably gets upset when Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem to speak to the Temple priests at the age of 12. Mary tells Jesus to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana—his first miracle in the Gospel of John. And Mary is on the scene with Jesus' brothers and sisters to attempt to talk some sense into him at the beginning of his ministry.

As a life-long Protestant it's always bothered me when some Roman Catholics speak about the perpetual virginity of Mary. Because in Mark Chapter 3 we can read: "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.'"^[2] Jesus refuses to go outside and talks about his family being whoever does the will of God. Though clearly Jesus wasn't an only child and Mary had at least four more children besides him. Jesus had brothers (plural) and sisters (plural). Here we see that Mary was concerned about his ministry and Jesus getting into trouble for what he was teaching.

Concerned enough that she brought all her children to speak to her oldest son and their oldest brother. Jesus meanwhile goes right on with what he knows God has called him to do.

Those are a few times we hear about Mary in the Bible besides when she gives birth to Jesus— Mary at the foot of her son's cross, the wedding in Cana, dragging Jesus out of the Temple as a child, and attempting to get him to come home at the beginning of his ministry. There's a few more Mary appearances, but these were the ones off the top of my head. Notice a pattern? Mary is strong-willed and full of courage.

Today in the Magnificat we heard Mary proclaim that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God is praised for the salvation of the lowly and the oppressed. Where do we think Jesus may have first heard that the first shall be last and the last shall be first in God's realm? We can't underestimate the influence that Mary had on her oldest child since we know that parents have an incredible influence on the lives of their children to this day.

Now let's consider the differences between the Roman Catholic view of Mary and the Protestant view of Mary. Why is Mary seemingly cast aside for Protestants? Well, in the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s there became a real focus on scripture and tradition stayed the focus for Roman Catholics. *Sola Scriptura* (by scripture alone) became a rallying cry for the Protestant Reformers. We should understand our Christian faith by turning to the Bible first and foremost is what they were saying. Mary, truth be told, isn't in the Bible that much. The overwhelming focus for Protestants became Jesus. Not Mary or the Apostles or Saints the Roman Catholic Church had declared as such.

Moreover in the Protestant Reformation, the idea of intermediaries went out the window. Protestants came to believe that Mary and Saints weren't needed to provide special access to God. In fact, Protestants came to believe that the Saints and Mary may even get in the way of the direct access that we all have to God. This also explains why Protestants view ministers differently than Catholics view priests. You don't need me to get to God and I don't have any more special access to God than you. In fact, whenever I get addressed as "Reverend Lorincz" I know it's not any of you trying to get my attention! Power and authority are different for Protestants than Catholics.

The truth is Protestants just don't hold Mary with the same high regard as Catholics. Catholics grow up having a real relationship with Mary and it may be painful to feel like that relationship is now gone. It may feel like one has to set the mother aside to have a closer relationship with her son. It wouldn't be honest to say that this is easily solved. You won't hear prayers like the Hail Mary or the Rosary or see statues of Mary in Protestant churches. You won't hear folks speak of Mary as the Blessed Virgin or the Mother of the Church or the Mother of God. It's not part of our tradition for Protestant denominations. And since we prioritize scripture anyway, these titles for Mary and practices of devotion are foreign for most Protestants because they're not in the Bible.

However, the Protestant view of Mary is evolving—many Protestants view her as a faithful follower of her son and a model of discipleship for all of us.[3] The title I've used for Mary is our sister in faith. To show how Protestant views of Mary are evolving, we can end with one of my favorite Mary stories. Methodist minister Heather Murray Elkins, who's also a Professor of Worship and Preaching at Drew Theological School, relates that in her first year of ministry a certain statue came to live in the corner of her office. On a Saturday morning, her husband got a call from a friend who had been hired to clear the grounds of a former Roman Catholic monastery recently purchased by an oil corporation. The friend got nervous about bulldozing over all the religious art and statues left on the monastery grounds. So he called to offer these objects free of charge to anyone who wanted them.

Dr. Elkins and her husband set off on a rescue mission of Roman Catholic art. Walking the grounds of this monastery, they looked at “figures of two-thousand pound saints sentenced to rubble.” They wondered what in the world they could possibly rescue with their bare hands and drive to freedom in their old, beat-up VW Beetle. Finally, they found a statue that caught their eye—the figure of a young woman lying face down.

After turning the statue over and brushing off her face, they recognized this as a statue of Mary. Her face was serene though her hands were missing. At her bare feet was a subdued serpent clutching the eternal apple in its jaws. They searched the ground for her missing hands without success and as the light faded, they decided that their rescue mission on these overgrown grounds of this former monastery was for Mary. Husband and wife carried this statue that weighs over a hundred pounds for a mile through the woods. More than once, Dr. Elkins relates, “She slips from our hands in the dark; more than once we have to grit our teeth, get a grip on our temper and trust by reciting, ‘Nothing will be impossible with God.’” Yet they did rescue Mary that day and that statue has been proudly displayed in every office Dr. Elkins has occupied. Often, people stare in surprise at Mary and ask, “Aren’t you a Protestant?” “Oh yes,” she says, “She’s in my Bible.”[4]

Mary may not be as highly regarded for Protestants as she is for Roman Catholics. Though Protestants can view Mary as a faithful follower of her son. Mary is a model of discipleship, called by God to be the mother of an incredibly special person. She responded to that call with courage: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”[5] She was a poor, young, Jewish girl from backwater Nazareth when she gave birth to one of the most remarkable people the world will ever know. And Mary does appear in the Bible several times—finding Jesus in the Temple as a young boy, encouraging Jesus to turn water into wine to keep the party going at a wedding, showing concern for Jesus when he begins his ministry, and staying with him through it all (out of deep love) at the foot of his cross. Mary is our sister in faith. And all Christians can be thankful for her life of love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Matthew 1:18

[2] Mark 3:31-32.

[3] J. Mary Luti and Andrew B. Warner, “Catholics in the United Church of Christ.”

[4] Dr. Heather Murray Elkins, *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions*, 2011, 363.

[5] Luke 1:38.