

BOOKENDS

Luke 2

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The cradle of Bethlehem leads to the cross of Calvary. In the story of Jesus, is there a character who was both at the cradle and also at the cross? Is there anyone who witnessed the Messiah as both an infant and a man?

There is only one character who serves as bookends to the story of our Lord. And that character is Mary. How unique her perspective must be, for she knew Him both as son and as Savior.

What was it like, Mary, watching Him pray when He was a boy? When He saw a rainbow, did He ever mention a flood? Was it odd teaching Him how He created the world? Did He ever wake up afraid? Did it ever cross your mind “That’s God eating my soup”? And when He saw a lamb being led to slaughter, did He act differently? (Max Lucado, “Twenty-Five Questions for Mary”)

It was the sixth month. The angel Gabriel was sent on assignment by God to Galilee, to a sleepy little village named Nazareth. There he was to find a girl – untouched and pure – a girl engaged to a good man, a carpenter whose name was Joseph – Joseph, a descendant of David.

And the girl’s name was Mary.

The angel greets her. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was confused, of course. Even frightened. “Don’t be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.”

If you were to ask what is the most frequent command in scripture, someone might say, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Someone else might say, “Forgive your brother 77 times.” But both would be wrong. Gabriel gives us the most oft repeated command in the canon. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Something new is happening, Mary. The world is never going to be the same again. Girl, your life is about to be turned upside down and inside out. God is going to be with you. God is going to demand things of you that you would never, ever imagine. But don’t be afraid.”

“Mary, you’re going to have a baby, a baby boy. You’re going to name him Joshua, or Jesus. He is the Son of God. He will inherit the throne of His forefather David. And this king, this king in your womb, Mary, of His kingdom – unlike all the other kings – there will never, ever be an end.”

I don't know how Mary waited that long before she started asking questions. I guess it's rude to interrupt an angel.

"How can this possibly be? I've not even been with a man. I can't have a baby!" The basics of the birds and the bees were understood, and Mary realized this was an utmost impossibility.

"Oh no, not an ordinary birth for this extraordinary boy. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. This is a holy child. Remember, I said He's the Son of God. Mary, nothing is impossible with God."

I guess Gabriel was quite convincing, at least for the moment. "Here I am, I am a servant of the Lord. Let everything be done as you have said."

The angel departs.

Mary goes to visit her family – Zachariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth has a miracle of her own in carrying John the Baptist, though not exactly like the miracle with Jesus. As Mary approaches Elizabeth, the little baptizer – yet in the womb – leaps in the presence of the Holy One within Mary.

Elizabeth – it sounds strange – talks like Gabriel. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" And then she says, "You are the mother of my Lord."

Mary, overcome with the emotion of all that is before her and beyond her, begins to sing a song of joy and praise to Yahweh.

"My soul magnifies the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

For He has looked with favor upon the lowliness of His servant.

Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed."

For the Mighty One has done great things for me;

And holy is His name.

He has shown His strong arms and scattered the proud.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things;

and sent the rich away empty."

By now, Joseph is in on the miracle, having his own messenger. He took Mary with him to register and pay the taxes. And while they were there – don't babies come at the most inconvenient times? Away from family and the familiar, He comes. The baby is born.

Shepherds are told by angels – and not just one, but a whole heavenly host. There is that command again, "Don't be afraid," the angel says. "I've got some good news of great joy. It's not just for you. It's for all people in every place. Today the Savior is born. Make no mistake – He's the Messiah. You'll find the Lord, the King, wrapped in hand-me-downs, sleeping in a feeding trough."

The shepherds went quickly and found Mary and Joseph and the Christ in the cradle. And Mary wondered at all that had happened with songs of angels and visits from shepherds.

As time passes, they go to the temple – to name Jesus, to present Him. It was time for purification. And there was an old man in the temple named Simeon, a righteous and devout man. God had promised him that he would not die until he saw God's Christ.

Of course, Mary didn't know that. Simeon did what mothers dread (1st baby vs. 3rd baby). He asked if he could hold the baby boy – taking Jesus, even as he asked, from her arms to his. And he just started singing. "I can die now, Lord. I have seen Your salvation. You've prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for the Gentiles and a glory for Israel."

Joseph and Mary are amazed at this old man's words. How did he know? Who told him? They thought it was – aside from a few shepherds and a host of angels – a pretty well-kept secret. Then the old man looked at Mary. "You know, this child will be opposed, and a sword will pierce your soul, too."

And when Jesus is a boy, they travel to Jerusalem – you know, the annual trip for the Passover. He's twelve. It's festival time. Mary thought he was with Joseph; Joseph thought he was with Mary. Oh, don't act so surprised – some of you have left your kids at First Baptist Church thinking that "daddy picked him up" or "he is with mom.". We're the ones who sit with the child while you sort out and point fingers at each other. It happens (happens at FBCA; we store kids for 30 days – like the dry cleaners do a left-behind garment). But it took them three days to travel back.

"Son, can you not see what you've done to your mother?" In fact, Mary herself said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been looking everywhere for you. We have been broken-hearted."

"Didn't you know? I had to be in My Father's house."

Mary has to think about that line, too.

When you read Luke's account, there is a constant image of Mary. She is a thinker. When there is the first annunciation account in Luke 1:29, it says, "She was perplexed by his words, and she pondered..." And then when the shepherds tell about the angels, it says, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). And then, after Jesus says, "Don't you know Mom? I had to be in my Father's house," in Luke 2:51 it says, "Mary treasured all these things in her heart."

Mary is no stock character. She is a thinker, a ponderer – one who treasures things in her heart as only a mother who loves her child can.

No one has ever been down this path before. No one ever will again. Mary is alone on a journey as the mother of the Son of God. Her own son eventually becomes her Savior. Simeon had warned her: “A sword will pierce your own soul, Mary.” He knew. The cross. He knew.

Every parent in here knows that you would bear the pain before you would allow your own child to suffer.

When John closes his gospel, Jesus is on the cross. And, indeed, there is the one character who bookends the cross as she did the cradle. Mary is there. Helpless as she sees the mistreatment of her son, her Messiah. I love John 19:26 – “When Jesus, therefore, saw His mother....” He is dying on the cross. He’s the Christ of the cosmos. And He’s worried about His mother, about Mary.

He said, “Woman, let John be your son. John, take care of this woman who is now your mother in your care.” And from that hour, John took Mary into his own household.

“I’m dying. Can’t watch after Mom anymore, John.” John, the beloved disciple, becomes the adopted son of Mary. Cares for her in his own house.

But this moment – the last time we meet Jesus’ mother in the gospel story – is full of pathos all of its own. Think back to that story, early on in the gospel, when Mary pointed out to Jesus that the wine had run out (John 2:3-4). She didn’t understand, then, that his time hadn’t yet come, but she knew that the way to get things done was for people to do whatever [her son] said. She doesn’t understand, now, that His time has come at last; that this was where it was all leading; that His calling, to turn the water of human life into the rich wine of God’s love, was now at last being fulfilled. We assume that she quickly came to believe all this through Jesus’ resurrection; and we assume it the more readily because of what happens here. John takes her to his own home and welcomes her as though she were his own mother.

But the story of the water and the wine has more resonance with this scene than simply Jesus’ comment to Mary. Here is Jesus, thirsty; and they give Him the low-grade sour wine that the soldiers used. He gave others the best wine, so good that people remarked on it. He himself, at His moment of agony, has the cheap stuff that the lower ranks in the army drank when on duty. (Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, p 129-30)

The Christ of the cosmos looked after all the details, even the care of His mother, as He bore our sin – and yes, even Mary’s sin – on His back.

By giving His mother as the mother of the beloved disciple, Jesus is calling her to give life back to the beloved disciple, to bring Jesus to birth, as it were, within him, so that the disciple may dwell in Jesus and Jesus in him. And in the same gesture, the beloved disciple is being called to become Jesus for His mother.... Here is the supreme unity of love and communion.

**Origen, a prominent theologian, was born about 80 years after the death of John the Evangelist. For him, this moment is essential to a full understanding of the gospel of John. In the introduction to his commentary, he writes:
Nobody can really understand this gospel
unless they too have reclined on the heart of Jesus
and received Mary as mother as the beloved disciple did.
(Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, p. 325)**

I want to leave you with a final image of Mary.

In Acts 1:14, we have the ascension of Jesus to heaven. The disciples return to Jerusalem and go to the Upper Room, where they stay. Peter is there. John is there. James is there. Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew. And then Luke tells us in verse 14, “Then these all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”

That’s our last word on Mary. Nothing else written. Nothing else recorded. Once her work was done, Luke had her join the other believers in prayer. By giving us Mary’s name here in Luke’s second volume, he reminds us that she was the bookend – the beginning of the gospel in the first volume of Luke. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also a disciple – the final bookend in his second volume.

Mary pondered these things in her heart as her son became her Savior and, finally, her resurrected Lord.