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Title: The Gift of Yes: Mary

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Scripture: [Isaiah 7:10-14](#)

Text: [Luke 1:26-38](#)

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We've made it past our very late Thanksgiving and now are headed to Christmas. The next month goes by fast or painfully slow, depending upon your age. For most adults, it's a busy time but Christmas can't come quickly enough for children. Soon, we will be singing "Silent Night" and holding candles high in the hope that the light

of Christ's birth can shine again in our hearts. But if we don't prepare well, the month will be past us and we'll miss an opportunity. Christmas will be here and gone as nothing more than another celebration to be packed away in the basement for another eleven months.

Christmas reminds us that our relationship with God is intimate. God comes to live with us so that we might live with Him. To let the doing of Christmas get in the way experiencing Christmas is to miss an opportunity to draw closer to God. Christmas is about saying yes to something beyond emotions or feelings, parties, and gifts. It comes each year with an opportunity to journey like shepherds and magi, to make our way through the darkness of our world to Bethlehem. We get to again peer into a stable and see a child lying in a manger. We have an opportunity to once again say "yes" to the one who is called Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, our Savior. When we do, we join a chorus of 'yesses' that have gone before us. The first person to say 'yes' is Mary.

It is a remarkable accomplishment given what we know. And what we know isn't very much. Much of what you think you know about the first person to say yes, probably has more to do with the fact that she said 'yes' than the facts of who she was. That is to say, her 'yes' created a legend that is larger than her life.

Mary appears only a few times in the New Testament and these texts do not provide much detail about her. But it is only human nature to try to find out more information about someone important to you. Some of you like to discover information about your ancestors by researching your family tree.

Historians research and interview eyewitnesses to write biographies. But family histories and biographies take time to develop. This was the case with Mary.

There wasn't a lot of interest in Mary in the early days of Christianity. They expected Jesus to return quickly and information about his mother wasn't important. But by the time of the 2nd century, maybe 40 years after Mary's death, people became curious and started filling in the blanks. There were two gospels written—what we call non-canonical gospels because they didn't make it into the canon of the New Testament—that developed Mary. They are the Protogospel of James and The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary.

They paint a picture of Mary which most scholars reject as historical fiction. Her parents are named, Joachim and Anne. At age 3 she climbed the enormous steps of the Temple by herself which everyone saw as a miracle. She was regularly visited by angels and had daily visions. Neither of those gospels was believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit or worthy of placing in the New Testament. But these stories became very popular throughout the next few centuries. In the fourth century, the Byzantine emperors used Mary to help unite the empire and make it Christian. As a result, she was central to the thinking of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the writing of the Nicene Creed.

Some of you know Nicene Creed because you once were in a church that recited it during worship. Do you remember how Mary's phrase goes? "...by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary. That Mary even has her own phrase shows how much her stock has risen. She is the only name in the Creed other than the names of the Godhead. Just a few years later at the Council of Ephesus, Mary was given the title "theotokos" which means God-bearer and the veneration of Mary was now orthodoxy.

By the second millennium, she'd edged out saints and martyr in art. She had her own order in 1097, with its most famous member Bernard of Clairvaux. He advocated the idea of Immaculate Conception and it became the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. The Franciscans came along in 1200 depicting Mary as a chaste, docile, graceful young woman, often reading a book or as suffering at the cross. This is when the rosary became popular, combining the Hail Mary with the Lord's Prayer.

Mary's rise to prominence wasn't without critics and they became vocal in the Reformation. Shortly after Luther was excommunicated, he said that Mary had become a common idol with countless services, celebrations, feasts, and hymns. ¹ Calvin had all the images of Mary removed from the

churches; others followed suit and a debate was launched which has spanned centuries about really knowing Mary. In Catholic and Orthodox traditions, Mary is highly venerated, a miracle worker, someone to pray to; in the Protestant tradition, she is simply a symbol of obedience and faith.²

The point is this. Much of what we think we know developed over centuries. Mary wasn't thought to be very important by the Christians in the first century. Certainly, we have no record of any conversations that the apostles had about how Mary could be the virgin mother of Jesus or how she was without sin.

What do we know about Mary? Most of what we know comes from Luke and from the annunciation story. She's from "...a town in Galilee called Nazareth... a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David....whose name was Miriam." (Luke 1: 26b-27) I know, I know. The Bible says Mary but that's the Greek translation of her name. Her Hebrew name was Miriam, a heroine of the Old Testament, the sister of Moses. To name your daughter Miriam was to have high expectations for her life and demonstrates her deep roots within faithful Judaism. They were proud that God had blessed them with a daughter, and they hoped by naming her with such a distinguished name that she'd walk humbly with God.

We know that Mary was a poor small-town girl. Nazareth was a very tiny town, probably no more than a hundred, two at most, in semi-Gentile Galilee, a Roman province in northern Palestine. It was west of the Sea of Galilee. Jerusalem Jews considered Galilee to be the boonies and without merit which is why Nathanael says to his brother Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1: 46)

We know that she was a young girl, "a virgin, engaged to be married." Rabbinic studies from the first century indicate that you could become betrothed or engaged at 12 years and a day. Most were, soon after their first cycle indicating that they were ready to conceive and have children. This means that she likely 12 or 13, maybe 14 years at the oldest. In cultures where life expectancy is short—the first-century life expectancy is estimated at about 40 years—families start early and have more children. You have more children in the first century because 1 in 5 died in childbirth and childbirth itself was very risky. Women hoped they would survive to care for the babies, but it wasn't a given.

I don't know if that changes what you know about Mary, but this is who she was. At the annunciation, she was a young, deeply spiritual, impoverished Jewish girl. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:30) If Mary was troubled and afraid, just wait. Gabriel drops the

bombshell her. "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 to 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." (Luke 1: 31-33)

There are things that Mary hears that we don't. She didn't hear the name Jesus; that's Greek. Rather, she heard either Yeshua in Aramaic or Joshua in Hebrews; it is the name of the warrior who took the Promised Land. It's a political statement. It was frightening.

Mary also heard Son of El Elyon instead of Son of the Most High. There are many Hebrew names for God in the Bible. There is El Olam, the God of Eternity. El Shaddai, God the Provider. Yahweh Shalom, the Lord is peace. But the angel identified Jesus, the coming Messiah, as the Son of El Elyon, the Most High God. El Elyon is a name of greatest power and glory who can do anything. It is as if the angel is saying to Mary, "He will be the Son of the God of Anything-Is-Possible."

Still, Mary's first response is pragmatic and honest. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1: 34) So Gabriel declares the mystery that none can fully understand. He says, "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 the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

And then reminds her of El Elyon saying, "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:37). With that reminder, Mary says 'yes'. Yes, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1: 38b)

All those traditions, all those stories and creeds, the miracles and the rituals, the orders and the prayers, were created because she said 'yes'. She said 'yes' when there was absolutely no practical, personal advantage in her saying 'yes'. She was a young, poor girl, who, out of her deep spirituality said 'yes'. She said 'yes' to God coming into her life and the result was God coming into the world. She said 'yes' to the most intimate event that a woman can ever have, the conceiving and carrying a child within and her intimacy allowed for God's intimacy to come into the world. She said 'yes' to the hope of God within her so that God could be within us.

Knowing Mary at Christmas is found in knowing her at this moment of her conception, the moment she said 'yes'. On Christmas, angels and shepherds declare the glorious moment; wise men travel from afar. Mary doesn't say a word. What we know about Mary and Christmas is this. She said 'yes' and

believed that everything that Gabriel shared was true because nothing is impossible with God. Mary leads the way in our journey to Bethlehem. She shows us that hope is saying yes to God's future for you.

This is where this message turns personal and moves from the knowing about Mary to knowing about you. When it comes down to it, there are only two who know you, fully, completely. Knowing you is only possible for you...and God. Deep down inside, what is it that you hope for?

I'm not talking about Christmas gifts or family reunions or even a white Christmas. These hopes come and go but within each of us is a greater hope, a desire to know the inner peace that comes in an intimate relationship with God. Placed within us at the moment of creation, hard-wired in everyone that is created in God's image is a desire to know who we are, who we belong to and where we are going. We can know these things because Mary said 'yes'.

Mary's intimacy in carrying the Son of God allows us to know the answers to those deepest questions. She models quiet acceptance by saying, "Yes, let it be."

Hope is claimed when we can say, 'yes'. Yes, I know who I am, know where I came from and know where I'm going. I know it by saying 'yes' to Jesus, 'yes' to the God of anything is possible who came to live with us.

Christmas reminds us that our relationship with God is intimate. God comes to live with us so that we might live with Him. I hope you'll own that and claim it, and like Mary, you do so by saying Yes again. Don't let the doing of Christmas get in the way of experiencing Christmas. Like Mary, say yes, let it be and know that the child she delivered in Bethlehem is the child that will someday deliver you.

¹ "What is Little Mary Here For?" Barth, Mary, and Election, *Pro Ecclesia* Vol XIX, No.1. Tim Perry, p. 52.

² Miri Rubin, *Mother of God, A History of the Virgin Mary*. New Haven, CT, Yale, 2009. As reviewed by Bruce G. McNair.