

Food for Thought--Mary



Photo by Bonnie Kittle, Unsplash

Our own mothers, if they were good mothers, had traits we love about them (and probably some we don't). And they are certainly not all the same. Some mothers know how to make their children laugh; some know just what food to prepare for them to give joy or comfort; some sing while they work, bringing music into our lives; some are great at telling stories or reading with their children; some are very good at listening to their children. Let's take a look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, and reflect upon what we find. Some of her traits will be somewhat unique to her, and others will be ones that all good mothers display. She was chosen by God for an extremely important role. What was it about her that made her the right mom for Jesus? The scriptures don't tell us as much about her as we might like (I'm very curious about her), but they do tell us what we need most to know about her.

We know, for one thing, that Mary was quite human. She is alarmed when Gabriel suddenly appears to her, and he has to begin by telling her "Fear not," just as we would need to hear and as nearly everyone in the scriptures is told at the beginning of an angelic visit.

We can also tell, however, that she is a very special human, one of faith. When Gabriel finishes his announcement to her, she immediately believes him, unlike Zacharias, someone you'd think would be an instant believer, for he was a priest and a good and righteous man. Yet it is Mary who immediately believes (she asks a "how" question, but she doesn't ask Gabriel for a sign to prove the veracity of his words). Most Jewish people at the time would not believe that a girl could outstrip a priest in faith.

Not only does Mary believe what Gabriel says, but she expresses her willingness to do whatever God wants and to be used by Him however He deems best. She does this even though the plan God has will come with a cost: she will lose her reputation as a chaste girl and a faithful fiancé (even though she truly is chaste). Her family and Joseph (until his angelic dream), will be disappointed in her, and that is always painful, especially painful to someone with a soft heart. Mary will be misunderstood. That will, however, probably cement in her heart the knowledge that reality is more important than outward appearances and that

outward appearances can even be completely inaccurate. That theme—that inner reality is more important than outward appearance—will be a theme her son will speak upon many times.

When Mary goes to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias, we see that she appears to have been very open to the Spirit of God, for she speaks or sings what will later be called the Magnificat—a song of praise and prophecy. Elizabeth and Zacharias speak wonderful utterances of the Holy Spirit too. Her 3-month visit with them must've been a vital time for her spiritually).

Mary also, as evidenced by what she says in the Magnificat, is able to grasp the upside-down nature of her son's coming kingdom. In Mary's time there was still a long-time default assumption that if persons are poor or blind or crippled, they are probably in this condition due to their own sin or that of a family member. Case closed. Although in the Old Testament we find numerous times when God helps or honors someone poor and although many passages in the Prophets and Psalms speak of God's compassion for the poor and oppressed and His anger with those that oppress them, people still tended to think that the poor (or ill or crippled) were unfavored by God. Yet in the Magnificat, Mary joyfully declares that God is not using the mighty, the proud, or the rich but instead is going to use and bless the poor and the people of low degree. We can see that she is still full of stunned and happy amazement that God is using *her*, a person of low estate.

One of the things that has always struck me the most about Mary is that she is described as a ponderer. Luke, who obviously interviewed Mary as he worked on his gospel, tells us multiple times that Mary "pondered" things in her heart. She was clearly, then, a sensitive and deep person. She sensed the significance of things even when she perhaps didn't fully understand them. When the shepherds find baby Jesus, they tell of the angels who appeared to them and what they said, and Luke says that Mary pondered these things, treasured these things, reflected on these things in her heart. She does this more than once.

One of the most surprising of these instances occurs when Jesus is 12, and his extended family loses track of him. I have tended to be uncomfortable with this passage because it does make it look like Jesus was thoughtless and makes Mary and Joseph look like they've completely forgotten what they'd been told about Jesus by Gabriel, Zacharias, Simeon, and Anna. After looking more carefully at this passage, however, I don't think Jesus was being thoughtless. His large extended family was divided into groups, and each group thought Jesus was with one of the other groups, and so probably nobody went to find him and say "time to hit the road" or "we're going to leave in the morning at 8:00." Probably after spending the day at the temple one day, he went back to where the family had been lodging and found nobody was there. Where did he sleep? I'm guessing, having no place to go, he probably started sleeping at the temple too. When Mary and Joseph return and find him, and Mary says, "Why did you do this?" and "We've been looking everywhere for you!" Jesus expresses puzzlement that Mary and Joseph had looked for him *anywhere but* the temple. He had turned 12, the age when boys pass into manhood and begin to learn their father's trade, so he had to be here in the temple, listening and asking questions, to prepare himself for his Father God's work. Luke tells us that Mary pondered and treasured this incident in her heart as well. I used to wonder

why Mary would want to remember this awkward event. Now, I think it was because Jesus's reply made her (and Joseph) remember who he really was. Mary and Joseph probably needed that reminder that Jesus was not just an ordinary boy, that he was a child of the Holy Spirit, that he had a divine and spiritual mission to fulfill. It had probably been a long time since they'd thought about Gabriel telling Joseph that Jesus would "save his people from their sins" and what that might mean. It has been at least 10 years since the magi came, and probably the past 10 years were filled largely with days that looked like--and were like--just ordinary life. They needed this reminder, and Mary hung onto it, pondered it, remembered it.

I also like the fact that when Mary noticed something which seemed special, important, she did not try to immediately turn the moment into a doctrine or some new cult; she simply sensed its significance, remembered it, held on to it. Her doing so made her able, years later, to pass on these moving moments to Luke who in turn passed them on to us. His is the only gospel which mentions these things. What a loss it would've been for us not to have known of the angels and shepherds and the many other events in Luke 1 and 2 which came to us because Luke was thorough and because Mary had stored these things in her heart.

But in addition to this practical way in which Mary's trait of being a ponderer has benefitted us, I think it is just a trait that God liked. Mary is a noticer, a ponderer, a deep person, a reflector, a thoughtful person, a recognizer of moments of great significance.

Mary's love was also a healthy one. She appeared not to play favorites with her children, and she clearly did not cosset Jesus or smother him. If she had, she could never have misplaced him at the temple or anywhere else (a smothering mother wouldn't have let him out of her sight).

She may have been unable at times to fully understand Jesus's ministry and destiny, but she didn't fail to love him. I imagine that she, like the disciples, was very much expecting Jesus's kingdom to be an earthly one that would begin in her lifetime (Gabriel had mentioned Jesus's position as a descendent of David and had spoken of his coming reign). Gabriel had also said things that didn't quite fit the default picture of a kingdom—he'd told Mary it would be an "everlasting" reign (obviously not the usual kind of reign), and he'd told Joseph that Jesus would save his people "from their sins" (not the usual sort of saving). Yet, all in all, she still probably imagined an earthly kingdom or simultaneously earthly and spiritual, rather than one that would be first spiritual and then, much later, both.

We don't know whether Mary was part of the group mentioned in Mark 3:21, a group of Jesus's friends or family who tell people that Jesus is beside himself, not in his right mind. She is definitely in the group mentioned in verses 31-32. These two groups may have been 2 different ones (with friends or family in both) or may have been one and the same. Did Mary think Jesus truly was losing his sanity? I doubt it. Early in Mark 3, after Jesus heals the man with a withered hand, a group of Pharisees and Herodians plot to kill Jesus. I am inclined to think that Jesus's family members were probably just trying to protect him ("Don't kill him—he's just having a nervous breakdown," they might've said). They may also have been trying to get him away from the crushing crowds who take up so much time that he doesn't have time to eat or rest. When later in Mark 3 Mary and his brothers show up outside a crowded house where Jesus is, are they part of the group who say he's not in his right mind, or were they a

separate group of family trying to protect Jesus both from the people plotting to kill him *and* from the group saying he was not in his right mind? We can't know. Either way, however, Mary was probably just trying to help him. That's what mothers do.

Mary, displaying a trait of all good mothers, gave Jesus her presence: she was there for Him, perhaps the most important role for any parent. She appears to have travelled with him during at least parts of his public ministry, along with numerous other women, probably cooking and helping in whatever ways they could. This trait is most powerfully obvious, however, when Jesus is on the cross. When he was crucified, most of his terrified, confused, stunned, dismayed, and grieving followers were watching from a distance. But Mary and John were right there. When Jesus, from the cross, tells John and Mary that he is giving John the role of caring for her from now on, they are clearly close enough to hear every word. Mary has been in agony for hours. As Simeon had prophesied in Luke 2, a sword did pierce her heart. And Joseph is no longer alive to help her endure this moment of agony. There is no other suffering for parents quite like that of seeing their children suffer. Mary did not run away so as not to have to see it. She could not prevent his suffering, and she could not stop his suffering, but what she could do was *be there* with him and that is exactly what she did.

The wedding at Cana shows us a few more things that were important about Mary, and it serves in a way as a set of bookends to the beginning and end of Jesus's earthly ministry. First, when the problem with the wine is discovered, Mary comes to Jesus probably out of concern for someone she cared about who would be embarrassed when this problem comes to light, and that shows us that she probably had a tender heart. Next, it shows us her faith. She brings to Jesus a problem that has no solution apart from a miracle, and that means she had faith that he could perform a miracle.

When Jesus replies to her, it is in a way that is cryptic to us but less cryptic to them. When he said that his time had not yet come, it shows that a time *is* coming and that she knows that. I am guessing that Jesus was saying "it's not quite time for a big, public miracle yet." Mary wisely says the best thing anyone could say. She says to the servants, "Do whatever he says" and may have walked off leaving it in Jesus's hands as to what he'll do. He of course tells them to fill the jars with water and carry some to the toastmaster. The toastmaster says it's the best wine of the wedding. He, however, didn't know a miracle had happened. Jesus did this in such a way that the only people who knew about it are himself, Mary, the servants, and his disciples (whose faith, John tells us, was cemented by this miracle). How wonderful that servants and a woman (2 groups generally not much honored) were the only ones besides the disciples to see the miracle happen.

What does the wedding at Cana have to do with the beginning and the end of Jesus's ministry? Mary's *words* here ("Do whatever he says") are the last words of hers which we're given verbatim in the New Testament. They are spoken by her in the early days of Jesus's ministry, and they are a message for all people always—to do whatever Jesus tells us to do. It is very cool that in her last recorded *actions* in the New Testament, we find Mary following her own advice. The resurrected Jesus, just before the ascension, has told his followers to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them. In Acts 1, Mary and Jesus's brothers (his brothers are now believers) wait in the upper room with the disciples and other followers,

just as Jesus had told them to do. She is following her son's instructions. And she will soon see amazing things again begin to happen.

I would also like to add something. For those who have no earthly father present in their lives or whose earthly father was abusive, we often remind them that they have a Heavenly father who can give them the kind of love a father gives. What about those who've lost their mother or whose mother was abusive? Well, Jesus describes His own love for Jerusalem, as being like that of a hen who yearns to gather all her chicks under the safety of her wings. This is a very motherly picture of love. That kind of love is there for us in Him as well, for He is Love.

--Sally