

Mary's Story



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About the Author

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Scripture Quotations

MSG

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NRSV

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KJV

King James Version.

Mary's Story

We cannot know the details of Mary's experience as the mother of Jesus, and Christian traditions vary in their beliefs about her life. This account is simply my imagination at work, rooted in my own experiences supporting women as they give birth.

Despite differences, we can unite in honoring the mother of Our Lord for her surrender to whatever God chose to send her. In that spirit, I pray that this message will be a blessing to all who read it. —Kathy Nesper

They say a woman forgets much about the birth of her child...but it isn't true. Even after all these years and now that my son is gone, I still remember every event, every breath, every heartbeat. And every woman with whom I've shared stories does too, whether she's 19 or 90, whether her story is a joyful or a painful one.

Luke wrote that afterward I pondered these things and treasured them in my heart. Women do that too after they give birth—if they dare. They hold the parts in their hands and turn them like pieces of a puzzle, first this way and then that, trying to see what picture they make.

I found the picture in my story, but not right away. It was there all along; it just took me a while. But I'm getting ahead of my tale.

You know how it began. I was just a young girl when an angel appeared to me. An angel! To be the mother of the Messiah was the honor every Jewish girl had dreamed of for centuries, but...to be pregnant before Joseph and I were married! If people didn't believe my unbelievable story, it would mean disgrace for me and my whole family. It might even mean I would be stoned to death.

I was puzzled at first about how it could be, and then amazed at the answer. But God had called me to a task, and despite the risk, I replied, "Let it be with me just as you say."¹

¹ Luke 1:38, MSG.



My fears were realized. Joseph was horrified and planned to break off our engagement—until God intervened. He too accepted God’s will, entering with me into the shame from the villagers who believed we both had sinned. Taking me into his home as his wife and yet making the additional sacrifice of preserving my purity.



Still, it all didn’t seem quite real until the day that I felt that tiny flutter within me. Gentle, like a butterfly’s wing. Was that...? It must be!

What an awe-inspiring moment it is to feel another life within! But it was not an unmixed emotion. Suddenly I realized that my body was no longer solely my own but also was the source of life for another human being.

The familiar words of the psalmist now had a personal meaning, a much deeper meaning. “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb....My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place....your eyes saw my unformed body.”²

I realized that what was happening to me was completely outside of my control, but was firmly within God’s.

The time went on. My body grew and became awkward. Bending over to stir the fire was difficult and made my back ache. Sleep eluded me as the babe tumbled and kicked within just when I wanted to rest, and my mind ran every which way.

In the silence of the night, my thoughts turned often to our first mother, Eve. “Be fruitful and multiply,” God had told her and her husband, “and fill the earth and subdue it.”³ She was *created* to give birth; it was God’s plan for her from the very beginning!

When they disobeyed, God told them their tasks now would be altered: “In *sorrow* you will bring forth children; in sorrow you will till the earth.”⁴ What could, what should have been care-

² Psalm 139:13, 15, TNIV©.

³ Genesis 1:28, NRSV.

⁴ Genesis 3:16, 17, adapted by author from KJV.

fee and fulfilling would now bring anxiety throughout their lives. Would the crops fail, choked by weeds or parched for rain? Would the child be healthy? Grow to serve God? Would it even live? Their disobedience brought lifelong uncertainty and worry upon us all.

And yet, there in the midst of God's words to them I saw the promise. The offspring of woman would crush the very enemy who had tempted them both into sin.⁵ The promise that I now had now been chosen to fulfill!

The world was changed. They would struggle and eventually die, as God had warned if they disobeyed. But those very struggles would remind them, me—all of us—constantly of our need for the God they had spurned.

It is God's way, is it not, always to call to us, to invite our trust? And always to pair the invitation with promise?

And so I waited.


*W*hen the decree came from the emperor requiring us travel to Bethlehem, my mother and the village midwife fussed over me. "Your time may come while you are traveling," they said. "If it does, it will not be what we hope for you, in your own familiar surroundings, with the support of the women you know, and who know you. But you can do what we would tell you to do. God designed your body to give birth. Listen to the wisdom God has placed within you; it will tell you what to do. Surrender to it and all will be well. That's the key...surrender."

Ah, a word I already knew more than a little about. Had I not surrendered when God called me to this task? Had not Joseph and I both surrendered to the shame we did not deserve? I had surrendered my plans, my dreams, my own body to the needs of the child growing within me. Was that not enough?



⁵ Genesis 3:15.

But we had no choice. We set out on the journey. Being so heavy with child, I could not move as quickly as other travelers, and so no room was left for us when we arrived. We were fortunate to obtain lodging among the animals, and I fretted. This was no place for a child to be born, much less God's own son! Joseph was humiliated, feeling he had failed to provide for us. We could only hope to hurry through the registration and return home before the babe came.

 I thought little of one more ache in my back that awoke me. I stretched and fell back to sleep. But a while later it came again. Then again. A tightening in my abdomen that extended around to my back. Could this indeed be my time?

I was suddenly wide awake, so though it was still early, I got up and began to straighten our cramped quarters. Checked the supplies my mother had tucked into my pack. Prepared the morning meal for Joseph and myself. And then we waited.

As time wore on, each tightening lasted longer. It was stronger now, commanding my attention. Closer and closer together, like waves breaking upon the shore. I ate and drank lightly to keep up my strength. I walked. And walked. We talked—and dreamed of the son that was so soon to arrive. Worried about the circumstances of his arrival.

The excitement of the morning stretched into boredom, broken only as I was carried along on the waves of the tightening. As the long hours passed slowly, night fell again and we dozed, moving back and forth between our weariness from the long day of anticipation and the constant awakening from the rhythm of my labor.

Then in the quiet of the night, it changed. Became stronger than I had expected. Now it took my breath away! I moaned and woke Joseph. I got up and walked again. Bent over against his chest when the tightening came. Stronger and stronger, closer together, the waves were no longer carrying me along but were crashing over me. The respite between them seemed barely to have begun when another broke upon me.

I could no longer accept it. Not in this place. Not with this intensity. I tensed against its coming, and I wept, and pain overwhelmed me. Help me! I can't do this! It's too much! God, please, release me from this task!



Joseph seized my eyes with his gaze. “Mary, what did the women tell you to do? What has God asked of us at every step? *Surrender*. Surrender to what your body is doing. Surrender to these circumstances God has placed us in. Don’t fight against it; surrender.

“Again, God?” I thought. “Once again you ask this of me?” And the same answer God had been giving me all along resonated within my spirit. “Yes. This struggle, every struggle is my invitation to turn your heart and soul, indeed your body, to *me* for strength. Trust in the purpose for which I have created you. And surrender.”



I did. As before, I let go of my grasp on my own hopes, my own plans. I released tears of loss, but also of relief in letting go. And to my amazement, when I stopped trying to do anything, and simply let my body do the work God had created it to do, it became bearable.

I leaned limply against Joseph as each wave broke, but now instead of resisting I let it wash over me, pulling me along in its wake. The rhythm came and went, came and went, and the passage of time no longer mattered. We were in harmony and at peace—with one another and with God.

When the change came, I knew that then it was time for me to work. The strength I thought had all drained from me resurged, and I began with each wave to push and press my baby down and out of my body. Rhythmically. Take a deep breath, push, rest. Again. And again.

Hair by hair, the back of his little head emerged, then rotated as one shoulder was delivered and then the other, so that now he was facing upward toward me. I reached down under his arms as the rest of his body slipped out with a rush, and I lifted my son, God’s own son, to my chest with a sense of elation I had never known before—or since! I was at one with the universe, and with the very God who had created it. I laughed. I cried. “Shh,” I said to my son, “shh. Don’t cry. I am here. The father God has given you on earth is here. And your Father in heaven is here with us. All is well.” And it was.



There, among the animals, I nourished him at my breast as Joseph looked on in wonder at God's gift to us and let his finger rest in the clasp of the baby's tiny fist. I wrapped him tightly in the cloths Mother had sent along, to calm those tiny, flailing limbs.

Having nowhere else to lay him, I placed him in the manger. You can imagine our surprise when shepherds arrived, looking for the baby. We probably wouldn't have believed their tale...if we hadn't had encounters with angels ourselves!

After they left, for a long time Joseph and I drank in the wonder of him together, amazed at all that had happened. Just the three of us, awake alone together in the still of the night, now a family by God's grace. And finally we all slept. All was indeed well.

It was not the last time God asked me to give up my plans. No, far from it! Like anyone else's life—like your life—it was asked of me again and again, in ways both great and small. I had to give up trying to understand my son when he was only twelve, and we found him questioning the teachers in the Jerusalem temple. It was difficult to release him as an adult to an itinerant ministry I didn't understand. One of the hardest times of my life was when my Joseph died.

But I thought my heart would break in two the day that precious son, now grown, instead of being crowned a king as I had expected, was lifted up on a cross to die an excruciating death. I had believed God's promise that he had been sent to be the Messiah so long promised to my people. But now the child for whom I had sacrificed my reputation, given birth in a stable, and so much more, was being executed as a criminal. Why? Had all my sacrifices been in vain? Surely this one was more than I could bear.

But by now God's invitation was familiar: "Once again, Mary, surrender your plans, your hopes, your dreams, to my plan. Trust me even when it doesn't make sense."

I did not understand. But by now I had learned that I did not have to.

*Y*ou know the rest of the story. That same son who had died before my very eyes was resurrected from death three days later. He became not only Messiah for my people, but the savior of the whole world.



It is not easy to surrender our plans, our dreams, our desire for control. No, that understates the matter. It feels like *dying*. And indeed it is a death, each time. The death of the plans, the dreams, the hunger for control.

It was no easier for me than for anyone else. Each time God asked it, I struggled. And yet, by God's grace alone, I responded.



So I have, as Luke said—as women do—pondered it so many times, and I have treasured these things in my heart. For when I finally fit the puzzle pieces together, I saw the picture that they made. With my son's birth, with his life, and again with his death, God had a much bigger plan than I ever could have imagined. The surrender of my plans that seemed so very difficult at the time was actually a *privilege*.



When God calls you to surrender your plans, your dreams, your control, even your idea of what God's plan looks like, oh no, it is not easy. But you can be certain of one thing: it is worth it. Always.

And if you do it, *all will be well*.