

# There's Something About Mary

*By Pastor Betsy Moe*

It is so good to be here. You have an incredible band and singers, and I just loved the worship, and it is a privilege to be here among you today. And I am so grateful that Jake invited me and that you are here to welcome me today.

So as Jake said, I am a pastor and I'm also a mom. I have four kids. I have two grown boys, one in college and one who graduated last year. And then I've got two girls, two 16-year-old girls, one of whom is a foster daughter from Guatemala that we just welcomed into our home last year. And that has been an incredible experience to become a licensed foster family in the state of Washington and then to kind of learn new parenting skills all over again. So I highly recommend the experience, although it is not for the faint of heart.

But I've been thinking about saying I am a mom and what that means. And so often I hear people say, "Oh, I'm not working outside the home. I'm just a mom." Or they separate their spiritual life from their parenting. Like, you know, "After the kids go to bed, that's when I can kind of settle down and journal and be present with God." Or, "You know, when I'm really growing spiritually is when I'm in a Bible study and my kids are in the child care." And I want to say that being a mother or being a parent is a very spiritual experience. And I want to talk about how we bring those experiences together and validate our work as parents, as mentors. And the video that we saw all together before the worship service talked about being spiritual mothers, spiritual fathers of the children around us. But this—what we do as parents or as mentors—fits into God's larger work of redemption. And it is good, hard, serious, joyful work.

I'm going to talk today about how Mary, the mother of Jesus, reveals to us something about how God relates with us and how God uses us as parents and mentors in this world. And so Mary has a lot of different wonderful things about her, but I want to talk about two things that I want to just get out of the way before I start talking about Mary. One is that Mary is not just a Christmas character. It feels a little strange to be talking about Mary and teaching something significant about Mary when there's not snow outside, while there's lilacs up here. Mary is not just a Christmas character. She is a significant figure in the New Testament that can teach us about the nature of God and how God works with humanity all year round.

Second, Mary is not just for Catholics. [Laughter] I'm aware that a lot of Protestant denominations are a little afraid to put extra focus on Mary. We don't want to sound like we're elevating her to some special status or insinuating that somehow Mary was without sin. Mary was fully human, and she is significant in God's work in the New Testament. Sometimes, just to avoid sounding too Catholic, we don't talk about her at all. But today, we're going to give her some focus.

So what can we learn from Mary? First, God chose Mary arbitrarily. Here's what Luke chapter 1 says: "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary." And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary was entirely ordinary. The Bible uses the term "favored," which means chosen, but it's important to remember that Mary was an ordinary young woman with no special royal heritage. She didn't have some kind of special devotion to God that made God notice her. This is what we hear. What I read in Luke is what we know about why God came to Mary. It was arbitrary.

Mary's name is even super ordinary. It's so ordinary that there are all these other Marys in the New Testament that we get her mixed up with. You know, which Mary are we talking about when you've got all those Marys at the cross of Jesus? Mary was ordinary, and it reminds us of something really important about us. Our value to

God is not in how much we do for God. It's not how devoted we are to the church or in the number of quiet times we have with God. I have value. You have value. Because God loves you and God loves me. We are created in the image of God. And in God's great faithfulness and love, we have been included in God's family through Christ. Our primary identity is simply beloved, favored, child of God. We can do nothing to earn God's favor or impress God, so set aside that expectation. No matter what you've done in life, good or bad, God looks at you and loves you because God made you and sees Christ in you.

This unmerited favor is true for so many of our heroes in scripture. It was not anything that Abraham and Sarah did that they were chosen by God to be the father and mother of a nation. It was nothing Moses did to be called by God at the burning bush to lead Israel out of slavery. God comes to us first, deems us worthy, good enough to be partners, and moves forward with God's plans. You are loved. You are good enough. This is perhaps the most important thing I will say today. You may be ordinary, but you are God's child.

The second thing I want to say about Mary—this is the really remarkable thing—Mary is treated as a full partner with God. Mary is entrusted with so much. She gives her body and her life to not only carry Jesus in her womb, but then accompany him through life. You know how sometimes when a kid wants to help you with a job, you give them something kind of small? I used to do this with laundry. My thing was—because I really don't like to do the socks, it's tedious—so I'd say, "Oh, this is the fun part! I'm going to give you the fun part." So here I am, I'm folding everything. I'm folding the towels the way I want the towels to be folded. And then my kid is, you know, picking out the socks and matching them. And I feel like it's a win-win. I get to really fold the laundry my way, but I get a little bit of help. Or if you're putting on a new doorknob, you get out all the stuff and you say, "Hey, I need your help. Will you sort the bolts into five piles for me?" You don't really need it, but it's a way to involve the child.

Has anybody seen the Netflix show *Old Enough*? It's kind of obscure. I don't even know why it showed up in my feed, but it is a super cute show. It's a reality show based in Japan in which toddlers, like older toddlers, four-year-olds, are given complicated errands to complete. One little girl was asked by her mom to walk to the store and buy three things at the grocery store. So she had to leave the house, go up the street, through a gate, take a right, walk down the street a little or the sidewalk a little way, then cross the street—a busy street—take a left, and then find the store. Once she got to the store, she had to remember the three things her mom asked her to buy and pull the money out of her pocket. She needed fish cakes, curry, and flowers. And so then the cameras follow this little four-year-old up the street, you know, through the gate, down to the right, across the crosswalk, and we're all watching like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe this four-year-old is doing this!" And then you watch her go into the store, and, you know, she just racks her brain—"I know there's a third thing"—and she gets it. And we all realize, wow, all I do is give my kid like the socks to fold, you know, in the living room.

*Old Enough*, the show, is a better example of how God partners with us as humans than how I used to involve my kids. I used to go in with this mentality: "If I want something done right, I'm going to have to do it," and, you know, I might give them a token job. God, on the other hand, cares more about the partnership and empowering us than in getting things right or perfect. Because with Mary, fully human Mary, God chose to partner in a profound way. The angel said to Mary, "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 Son of God." God could have dropped off a baby on Joseph and Mary's doorstep and said, "Raise this child for me." You know, leave a little note. "Raise this child for me. P.S., I really owe you one." But God didn't. God could have shown up in human form at the age of 30. But God didn't. God came to Mary and gave her this task of carrying the Son of God, thus making Jesus fully God and fully human. Ordinary Mary, the young nobody from Nazareth, would literally bear Christ to the world. This is not a "fold the socks" kind of job or "count these bolts" partnering. This is "go to the store, cross a busy street, pick up fish cakes, curry, and flowers" kind of partnering.

But there's even more to it than that, than just carrying the Son of God in her womb. In preparation for some of my Holy Week and Easter preaching this year, I read about the women in Jesus' life and the role they played, the significant role they played with him. One scholar, Caroline Lewis, wrote about Mary of Bethany—you know, one of those other Marys. She wrote about Mary of Bethany, who was the one who interrupted a meal where Jesus was eating and she poured out this jar of alabaster—or from an alabaster jar, she poured out this ointment on Jesus' feet and then wiped his feet with her hair. And that ointment was an ointment that prepared people for burial. Her coming to the dinner and pouring out a year's worth of ointment, giving all she had, was a way of showing Jesus, "I know where you're headed. I am not in denial like many other disciples. I know where you're headed because you have said some controversial things that are getting you in trouble and you are headed for your death like you say. This is not going to be easy, and I want you to know I am all in with you."

Lewis said about Mary of Bethany that she was "loving Jesus into his future." Mary of Bethany was loving Jesus into his future. This suffering, humiliation that Jesus was going to have to go through—Mary was loving him into it. Whereas all his disciples would fall away and abandon him in his darkest hour, Mary had already given him all she had and she said, "I am going to be with you in this." What if Jesus was able to have the courage to walk into this holy week of suffering because he knew he was not alone? That human side of Jesus that didn't want to do it was able to do it because he had been loved into his future. Now that's partnering. That is "all in" partnering.

After Caroline Lewis said this about Mary of Bethany, she actually pointed backwards to Jesus' mother. She said that Jesus' mother Mary, by allowing her body to be used to carry him, and then by raising this child, by sacrificing all she had, his mother Mary also was one that loved him into his future. Her actions allowed Jesus to do what he came to do. To love, to bless, to heal, to die, to rise. God partnered with Mary in a legitimate way. Like I said, God could have left a baby on the doorstep. God could have just shown up in Jesus as fully human 30-year-old. But instead, Jesus grew up with Mary as his mom. He received love and instruction and encouragement. He saw what courage looked like. He saw what faithfulness in a family looked like. And in this way, Mary was a significant, legitimate, full partner with God.

Now, I know how scandalous this sounds. That Jesus wouldn't be who he was without the influence of his mother and his father and the other loving people in his life. You're going, "I don't know, maybe these Presbyterians are a little too weird." [Laughter] But this is the mystery of God. How God has always worked with humanity. For the healing and redemption of the world, God has always partnered. Those heroes I mentioned before, they weren't just pawns to God. They weren't just placeholders to give the illusion that God partners with humanity. Abraham and Sarah moving into the unknown was how God established a people. Moses' courage standing up to Pharaoh was how God set the Israelites free. We are full partners with God.

So now what does this mean for us? First I want to speak to the moms. In God's economy of redemption, there is no such thing as "I'm just a mom." Your everyday actions of care and provision and loving discipline, your routines of bathing and reading and playing Legos. Your modeling of self-care, getting mental health support, taking breaks, asking for help when you need it—all of this is loving your child into their future. When you love a child into their future, which may in fact include suffering, God is generating abundant life through you. God could accomplish what God set out to do without us. But God chooses mutuality. And in this, there is so much joy.

Mary had a sense of what she was being called into. She knew that God choosing and using her was an act of mercy for all. She broke out into song over it. She said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." Mary knew that God was up to something big involving justice for vulnerable people. She went on to sing, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the

lowly. He's filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. God has come to the aid of his child Israel." God used, God partnered with a mom to do great things.

But being bearers of God's redemption and justice and healing is not just a mom thing. It is a human thing. The ways we love other human beings, especially the vulnerable ones in our midst, is absolutely how God has determined to partner with humanity to redeem this world. So dads, your work is important. Aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas, teachers, mentors. Those of us who look out for our neighbors. Your love, your work, your patience matters. It is being used by God.

So there is something about Mary for all of us to consider. Like Mary, we are valued just as we are. Like Mary, we are legitimate partners with God. And like Mary, we get to witness with joy God's faithful work of redemption that God is bringing about for us and through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.