



# Mary, Model of the Communal Nature of Calling

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Assuming the accuracy of the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words,” I begin this article with a question for reflection: What image first comes to mind when you encounter the title of this issue, “Mary, Mother of God”?

A quick internet search for images of this title provides an unscientific glimpse into popular perceptions of Mary in her role as the mother of Jesus, Savior of the world and God incarnate. Multiple images appear of Mary alone with her child, cradling him in her arms while a majestic halo of light surrounds her head. Another common depiction is of Mary set entirely apart from other human beings while dwelling in the heavens, radiant and often crowned, appearing either alone or surrounded by an angelic host that contributes to her image as a distant, exceptional figure.

*Certainly, the biblical portrait of Mary shows her to be a woman of distinctive faith in her obedience to the call of God. But in working through Luke’s portrayal of Mary, another facet occurs, which is of her connectedness with Elizabeth and the community around them. Mary shares with and is supported in her vocation by those who surround her.*

To be sure, these are powerful images that reflect Mary's extraordinary role in salvation history. But what if we meditate instead on the rather ordinary portraits of Mother Mary in biblical texts such as Luke 2:41–51, where she is indistinguishable within a crowd of travelers until she realizes she has lost track of her curious preteen son? This article will explore how such snapshots of Mary in Luke's Gospel demonstrate how her extraordinary vocation, born of God's initiative in her otherwise ordinary life, is supported by other people in her community, past and present. Special attention will be given to Mary's relationship with Elizabeth as part of Luke's unique account of the events surrounding Jesus's birth. Although Mary's specific role in God's saving work is portrayed as unique in Luke, she does not carry it out in isolation as a lone hero of the faith. Instead, her vocation is portrayed as inextricably linked with God fulfilling God's promises to her people, Israel, and to the whole world that her son, Jesus, came to redeem. This image of Mary, Mother of God, as deeply embedded in a community as she is empowered to live out her divine calling, provides insight and inspiration for Christian ministry and discipleship today.

Luke's Gospel is a main source for understanding Mary because it paints the fullest portrait of her in the New Testament. We first meet Mary in Luke in the extraordinary episode known as the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel unexpectedly appears to her to inform her that God's favor is upon her and that she will bear God's promised Messiah through divine intervention (Luke 1:26–38). Although Mary is engaged to Joseph and presumably would be able to conceive a child through the common means once married, the text clarifies that the Holy Spirit will be the cause of Jesus's conception in her womb while she is still a virgin (vv. 34–35). Therefore, Mary's child will not only reign on David's throne forever but will also be called Son of God (vv. 32–33, 35). A miracle is about to take place in Mary that fulfills God's long-standing promises to Israel!<sup>1</sup> It is also striking that Mary, likely just a teenager, agrees to trust and serve God in this bold, risky way.<sup>2</sup> There are no reported witnesses to Gabriel's announcement, so

<sup>1</sup> E.g., 2 Samuel 7:8–16.

<sup>2</sup> For Mary likely being of the common marriageable age (twelve or thirteen) for females in her context, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 86, including note 17.

Mary likely faces rejection by her fiancé and community if they do not believe that her pregnancy is the result of divine intervention.<sup>3</sup> Mary's response to her call to bear the Messiah, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v. 38), portrays her as the paragon of a faithful servant of God, which in Luke's Gospel is one who not only hears God's word but also lives it out<sup>4</sup> It is no wonder that Mary is often seen as an exceptional individual.

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Undoubtedly, Mary's vocation is unique. But as much as Mary may appear to be a solitary, extraordinary exemplar of faith when entering her story at the Annunciation, examining her role in the wider context of Luke's narrative reveals her otherwise ordinary status and how her divine calling is supported by other people. As we will see, even the mother of God relies on the faithful witness and wisdom of others as a member of the community of God's people.

This includes Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are introduced at the beginning of Luke (1:5–25) before Mary first appears at the Annunciation. They are a married couple who will be blessed with a son who, like Jesus, will also be conceived through divine intervention and will play a key role in God's redemption of humanity. This son is John the Baptist, the prophetic forerunner who will prepare people to receive Jesus, God's promised Messiah. Of the New Testament Gospels, only Luke includes the prophecy of John's conception (1:5–25) and the story of his birth (1:57–80), weaving these together with the prophecy of Jesus's conception (1:26–38) and the story of his

<sup>3</sup> Matthew's account does, in fact, describe Joseph's intention to end his engagement to Mary when he first learns she is pregnant, but he is prevented from doing so by divine intervention (Matt 1:18–25).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Luke 8:15, 19–21; 11:28.

birth (2:1–20). This literary structure leaves no doubt that Jesus’s story and Mary’s role in salvation history are to be understood as part of the broader story of God graciously fulfilling God’s promises to Israel and the whole world.

It is when we read the birth narratives of John and Jesus together that Mary’s lack of elevated status in her first-century context is highlighted. Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth by explicitly noting that both belong to the priestly class and are living righteously before God (1:5–6).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Zechariah’s role in the narrative begins with him serving as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, an important center of Jewish identity and piety at the time the story takes place (vv. 8–9). By contrast, we first meet Mary in Nazareth of Galilee (v. 26), at a distance from Jerusalem and the temple, with no comment on her social status or piety. Even though her fiancé is of the house of David (v. 27), Mary has not yet entered his household and family status.<sup>6</sup> The silence on Mary’s status, therefore, casts her simply as a young, unmarried Jewish woman with no claim to special religious or social standing. In fact, she would be of marginal status in a patriarchal society that generally valued age over youth and ascribed greater status to women who were wives and mothers.<sup>7</sup> This shows that God’s choice of her to play a key role in salvation history is a pure gift that flows from God’s own graciousness and determination to fulfill God’s promises in ways that often upset the norms of the world.

Mary expresses this dynamic in the prophetic song of praise (commonly known as the Magnificat) she voices a bit later in the narrative (1:46–55), identifying herself as God’s lowly servant whom God has favored. The result is that she—a humble, ordinary person—is called blessed (v. 48). Although Mary receives an extraordinary calling from God to bear the Savior, her song identifies her with her entire people, Israel (e.g., vv. 54–55), on whose behalf she also sings. This demonstrates how God’s favor to her reflects God’s broader work through Jesus to exalt God’s lowly servant, Israel, and all those who fear God, according to God’s promises and great mercy (v. 50, 54–55).

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the author of the Gospel of Luke as “Luke,” while acknowledging that we cannot be certain of the author’s identity.

<sup>6</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 39.

Rather than standing apart from all others, Luke's portrait of Mary shows her standing in solidarity with the people of God.

I will return momentarily to the Magnificat. But first, it is important to further examine the linking of Mary's story with that of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Although the latter have priestly status, they too experience a type of marginalization—that of being of advanced age and yet childless (1:7). This situation threatens the continuation of their family lineage and has also disgraced Elizabeth, who is said to be barren (vv. 7, 25). Her plight recalls that of several of her ancestors, including Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, who were also unable to conceive until God intervened.<sup>8</sup> Continuous with the scriptural accounts of these women, Elizabeth's pregnancy in her and Zechariah's advanced age is to be understood as the result of God's work to create life amid human impossibility. Therefore, although Luke's narrative contrasts elements of Elizabeth's and Mary's socio-religious status, it also portrays both women as experiencing marginalization (albeit for different reasons) that is lifted when God miraculously creates new life in their wombs. Although there is no indication that Mary needed a miracle to conceive, Luke's intertwining of her and Elizabeth's experiences of divinely enabled pregnancy shows that her vocation as mother of Jesus is intimately linked with the vocation of motherhood God gave to Elizabeth and other women who also found themselves the unexpected recipients of God's grace. Of course, Mary's child is uniquely Son of God and promised Messiah, but his arrival in the world is part of the larger pattern of God working through the ordinary and powerless to bring about God's purposes, which are beyond human control. Luke's narrative thereby invites us to view Mary as a beneficiary of these other women's witness to God's faithfulness as she says yes to her own vocation as Mother of God.

It is particularly powerful that Mary's miraculous conception of Jesus finds precedent not only in the stories of her ancient foremothers, as told in Scripture, but also in the contemporaneous experience of her relative, Elizabeth. At the Annunciation, Gabriel cites Elizabeth's divinely enabled pregnancy—despite her advanced age and barrenness—to assure Mary that her virginal pregnancy will also occur by God's power to do the impossible (1:35–37). At the end of

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 15:1–18:15; 21:1–7; 29:31–30:24; 1 Samuel 1.

Mary's startling, life-changing encounter with God's messenger, Elizabeth provides a living testimony that may very well help Mary muster up the courage to accept God's dangerous calling (v. 38).

Luke's narrative subsequently shows that Elizabeth is not merely an abstract sign to Mary that confirms the miraculous nature of her own pregnancy. Instead, she acts as a fellow pilgrim with Mary on their remarkable and risky journeys of discipleship of the God who inverts the ways of the world. This is apparent in Mary's three-month stay with Elizabeth after she receives the promise to bear Jesus (vv. 39–56). This unique Lukan episode leaves room for various interpretations because of the details it omits. These include a lack of explicit motivation for Mary's journey to Zechariah and Elizabeth's home, indication of whether she traveled alone or with others, and clarity on precisely how much time passed between the Annunciation and Mary departing on this journey. I will not attempt to clarify such ambiguities but rather show how Mary's visit with Elizabeth reinforces Luke's portrait of Mary's vocation as nurtured by others, even as she nurtures the Son of God in her womb.<sup>9</sup>

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It is striking that the first thing Mary does after Gabriel leaves her is visit Elizabeth, who is portrayed as the first person—not Mary's parents or even her fiancé—to learn that Mary is now pregnant.<sup>10</sup> Just as Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, so too does the Spirit prompt Elizabeth to declare that Mary is carrying the Lord and to

<sup>9</sup> A recent work that does interpret the gaps in the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is Daniel P. Mueller, "Helping the Expectant Mother Elizabeth: The Nature and Purpose of Mary's Travel in Luke 1:39," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2023): 276–96.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth comes to this realization when her unborn baby leaps in her womb (Luke 1:41, 44).

bless both Mary and her unborn child (vv. 41–45). Mary thus receives something valuable from her relative that affirms her calling to bear the Son of God.

The text does not state whether Mary felt need of this confirmation. Perhaps she had continually stood firm in her trust in God's promise since the moment Gabriel left her. Or maybe Mary, like other servants of God, experienced moments of doubt. In any case, if we consider the possibilities the gaps in the narrative allow, it is reasonable to conclude that Mary found comfort in the affirmation provided by Elizabeth, the only person in her life who can relate firsthand to the experience of suddenly becoming pregnant by divine intervention. Whereas Mary's other family members, friends, and neighbors may have doubted or even ridiculed her claims to be pregnant by divine action, Elizabeth is empowered by God to believe and affirm that Mary miraculously bears the Lord. In turn, we might imagine that Elizabeth's blessing empowers Mary to persevere in her faith and vocation, despite whatever doubt or opposition she might face.

It is, in fact, the Spirit-filled blessing of her relative that prompts Mary's song of praise (vv. 45–55). Without the support of Elizabeth, Mary may not have given the world the Magnificat! Indeed, some manuscripts of Luke have Elizabeth voicing this song instead of Mary. This is understandable, given the fact that Elizabeth also finds herself to be blessed in believing that the Lord's promise to her will be fulfilled, just as she declares of Mary (v. 45). This blurring of the song's authorship in Christian tradition supports the image already apparent in Luke of Mary and Elizabeth being able to identify with each other because of their shared experiences of God's surprising grace.

Furthermore, Mary's song reflects some of the themes and language of Hannah's prayer (or song) of praise for God reversing her situation of childlessness (1 Sam 2:1–10). Whether the author of Luke intends us to view Mary as drawing directly from this scriptural song or as simply inspired by the Spirit to sing her own, the similarities in these women's songs reinforce Luke's portrait of Mary being supported by the community of God's faithful as she carries out the calling God has given her. Once again, Mary does not appear as an isolated exemplar of faith, but rather as a woman who draws strength and inspiration from others who have also experienced God's miraculous power. In fact, her prophetic song, which beautifully interprets both Scripture and God's present activity in the world, is ultimately

a communal song that proclaims the joy of her entire people as God faithfully fulfills God's promises.

Beyond Elizabeth's blessing of Mary and Mary proclaiming her song, Luke's narrative does not detail what these two women did during their three months together. It is possible that Mary provided practical support to her elder relative, who was at least in her sixth month of pregnancy when Mary arrived.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, it is plausible that the more-experienced Elizabeth wisely advised Mary on her own pregnancy and upcoming marriage, providing mentorship to the young woman. And given that Mary first sings the Magnificat in Elizabeth's presence, we might also imagine that at some point, these two women discussed the stories and Scriptures of their people that provide language for Mary's song and resources for understanding God's redemptive activity in their own lives and times—especially since both women are carrying children who will play special roles in God's work. These possibilities further foster a portrait of Mary, Mother of God, as a relatable woman who receives support from others in her community as she carries out her divinely given vocation.

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Additional examples from Luke's Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, could be explored as support for the image of Mary modeling the communal nature of a calling from God—that is, one that benefits entire communities while also being supported by those same communities. These include the story of Jesus's birth and the testimony of the shepherds to Mary and Joseph about the divine revelations they received about their child (Luke 2:1–20); Jesus's parents presenting him to the Lord in the temple and receiving both prophetic blessings and warnings from Simeon and Anna about what Jesus's life and Mary's vocation will entail (vv. 22–38); and Mary's presence

<sup>11</sup> For this interpretation, see Mueller, "Helping the Expectant Mother Elizabeth."



among Jesus's followers after his resurrection and ascension, when they are awaiting the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14).

However, I end my overview of the evangelist's portrait of Mary by returning to her presence among a crowd of pilgrims in Luke 2:41–51. This passage tells of Mary and Joseph's custom of traveling to Jerusalem each year for the Passover festival, thus portraying Mary as one who regularly participates in common practices of her Jewish community. Indeed, Mary and Joseph are traveling with a group of people when, already a day's journey from Jerusalem on their way back to Galilee, they realize that their twelve-year-old-son, Jesus, is not with them. Although this passage largely centers on Jesus learning from the teachers in the Jerusalem temple, it also gives a snapshot of Mary as an average mother who is understandably anxious about her missing child, since she does not yet fully comprehend the nature of his divine calling. As much as Mary would bless her community through her prophetic insights into God's work and her nurturing of God's Messiah, perhaps she was also blessed in this stressful situation by her fellow travelers helping her search for Jesus and sharing their food and water to replenish her strength. Indeed, without the drama of Jesus's disappearance, Mary would be indistinguishable from the otherwise nondescript crowd of pilgrims who have gone out of their way to faithfully worship God. This image of Mary as a fellow traveler on the long, challenging, and often surprising journey of seeking and serving God provides an appropriate starting point for offering a couple of brief reflections on the significance of her story for Christian ministry and discipleship today.

First, finding Mary among the unnamed masses reminds the church of its call to live in communities of mutual care and concern that go beyond the boundaries of particular congregations. As remarkable as Mary's calling is as Mother of God, Luke frames her vocation as being lived out in reciprocal relationships with others. And this occurs not only in designated holy places, such as the temple, but also in the common spaces of daily life, such as the home of a relative. Mary thus provides inspiration for conceiving of Christian community as being cultivated not just in church buildings but also in coffee shops, homes, and parks, and always with openness to receiving unexpected blessings from the same neighbors the church seeks to serve. The church is not called to live in isolation from others but rather, like Mary, to find life within larger communities.

Second, Mary as model of the communal nature of a divine calling is especially instructive for pastors and other Christian leaders. As noted, Mary's specific vocation is unique in some regards, as are the vocations of Christians today who are called to leadership roles in Christian communities. Yet, as described above, even the mother of God relied on the support of others. This extends an invitation for church leaders to also draw strength and inspiration from others in the communities they serve, including by hearing their living testimonies to God's mercy and grace. It is also a reminder that the church's ministry ultimately relies on all Christians living out their unique vocations to serve in various ways. As central as Mary is to God's unfolding plans in the opening chapters of Luke, the ministries of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and others are also needed. Christian leaders are called to recognize the vocations of others in their communities and help them develop and share their gifts for service. And the role that Elizabeth may have played in mentoring young Mary reminds us of the enduring importance of leaders mentoring others who sense God's call.

Ultimately, many meanings can be made from Mary, Mother of God. One gift of Luke's account is its portrait of Mary as an ordinary person whom God blessed and used in extraordinary ways, so that her story is both accessible and inspirational for all Christians' journeys of discipleship. ⊕

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