



# Hearing Mary's Song, Remembering It through Telling Stories

MARY ELIZABETH HESS

I have worked on stories—and more specifically, digital storytelling as a form of faith formation—for more than three decades.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of that journey is my conviction that we become who we are through the stories we tell and the listeners who hear them. In Christian community these stories are inescapably interwoven with God's story.<sup>2</sup>

I'm a Roman Catholic person, even after more than two decades of service on a Lutheran seminary faculty. I could tell lots of stories

<sup>1</sup> For a list of my writing, see [meh.religioused.org](http://meh.religioused.org); you can also visit my research website on digital storytelling as a form of faith formation at [storyingfaith.org](http://storyingfaith.org).

<sup>2</sup> For a beautiful and powerful articulation of this point, see Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019).

*Marian piety has become interwoven throughout the centuries in stories told and retold. These stories invite us in, helping us understand not only our God and our faith but the world. They also help us understand and have hope for the often difficult world in which we live.*

about this journey, but most pertinent to this *Word & World* issue is my relationship with Mary, whom we claim as the mother of Jesus. I'm going to write very personally here, since I know my coauthors in this issue have much to add in other veins.

I want to start with my name: Mary Elizabeth. Perhaps the most famous pairing of those two names comes in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke, when a miraculously pregnant Elizabeth greets a newly pregnant Mary this way:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. (Luke 1:42–45)

The Lukan text continues with Mary's response to Elizabeth, a text that has come to be known as the Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord;  
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.  
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generations to generations.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and the rich sent away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to his promise to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:46–55)

These women are full of joy, witnessing to the God they know personally in their very wombs. Mary's song names within it God's

justice and mercy. It is a powerful proclamation of the *kerygma*, and it has been set to music and sung in many cultures and languages over the centuries. These words, this song, ground me. I hold them very close to my heart. And then the questions rush in, as does the sheer wonder of this mystery.

How is it that God chose to incarnate?

How is it that, in doing so, God chose to be birthed from the womb of a humble peasant woman?

And to do so as an infant, that most vulnerable and powerless of all human beings?

These are questions that do not hold easy answers, and for many of us the elevated language of theology does not actually help much in our daily lives. Can we perhaps engage these questions through story? Is there a way to ground the witness of Scripture even more thoroughly in our daily lives?

I don't know how much you know about Roman Catholics. In truth, we are such a huge and global and diverse community that it is dangerous to make broad generalizations, but I'm going to risk one anyway. Roman Catholics like to think in analogies. We like to do our theology in incarnational ways. We think and we move sacramentally.<sup>3</sup>

---

*Hearing this text over the centuries, our response has been to try to lean into the joy these women express, and to do so in ways that continue to witness to God's action in creation. That witness emerges in practice, in traditions and patterns of moving that are deeply embodied.*

---

Hearing this text over the centuries, our response has been to try to lean into the joy these women express, and to do so in ways that continue to witness to God's action in creation. That witness

<sup>3</sup> A very powerful articulation of this analogical imagination, one which brought me to novels and theological education in the first place, can be found in Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

emerges in *practice*, in traditions and patterns of moving that are deeply embodied. One of the clusters of practice has been to imagine our way into what biblical stories might mean, what they might feel like, to find ways to tell the stories that highlight the experiences in different ways.

We learn in Luke that Mary rushes off to Elizabeth to share her good news. But how is this good news? Mary is a single woman, unwed, clearly facing marginalization. Elizabeth is deep into her years of aging, pregnancy making her very vulnerable. Were I in their situation, I'm not sure joy would be my first response. Yet, as Elizabeth meets Mary, she is filled with joy and immediately recognizes what God has done. Her response—"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"—is a phrase most Catholics know so well we can recite it without conscious thought in the words of the prayer called the "Hail Mary."<sup>4</sup>

But perhaps it is worth a little bit of *conscious* thought. What is this recognition that is Elizabeth's response to Mary's pregnancy? How can it be joyful, in all the meanings of that word? We even learn that Elizabeth's infant son, John, still in her womb, has leapt for joy, recognizing his Lord in the only way infants not yet birthed can do. God is with them in a very tangible way, and their response is not fear but joy: joy to be shared; joy to be proclaimed.

The traditions associated with Mary, as the mother of God, are one very powerful form of imaginative practice. For me it is much easier to feel my way into Mary's story than into Jesus's. And like many of my co-religionists, praying to Mary as a form of intercession to the God of awesome power and might feels more accessible than directly addressing God. It is not that I see Mary as God; it is that I imagine a mother seeking solace for and from her son, and that is an experience with which I can relate.

There are so many different stories associated with Mary! And so many different ways to imagine yourself into them. Some of the most powerful are connected with moments in history when someone believes they have encountered Mary directly. The story of Our Lady

<sup>4</sup> The prayer: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

of Guadalupe is the one that has come most often to me from friends, and the one I've grown to hold close.<sup>5</sup>

That story begins on a December morning at the top of a very cold mountain in Mexico. Juan Diego trudges over the mountain as he struggles to feed his family and carve out a way to survive. He is a Christian, but he is not a member of the wealthy and powerful Christian community who controls the surrounding region. He is a peasant, whose native language is Nahuatl, not the Spanish of the conquistadors.

On one of his journeys over the mountain he encounters a glowing young woman, dressed in the clothing his people associate with pregnancy, and speaking his native language. He instantly knows her to be the mother of our Lord. She asks him to go to the bishop and tell him to build a church right on the spot where she is speaking to him.

I can imagine many responses I might make, many things I might think, were I in such a situation. What would your response be? Juan Diego doesn't do what I might do: run away in fear, or refuse to believe what he is seeing and hearing. Instead, he does what Mary did when the angel announced her pregnancy: he accepts the challenge.

He immediately does his best to argue his way into the bishop's presence. The bishop, however, doesn't recognize Juan Diego as the bearer of an important message. All he sees is what he knows to see: a peasant spouting nonsense. He throws him out, ignoring the message. The next day the glowing woman again appears to Juan Diego, and again Juan Diego trudges over the mountain and pushes his way into the bishop's presence. Yet again he is ignored. On the third day, Juan Diego is in deep despair as the woman approaches him yet again. How can he, a poor peasant, make the bishop understand? He does not doubt Mary's presence, but he doubts his own ability to share her message in a manner in which it will be heard.

Have you ever found yourself in a place or situation for which you have no words to speak of the God who sustains you? I know that I frequently find myself in settings for which traditional Christian language cannot be heard as anything other than oppressive.

<sup>5</sup> There are myriad stories of Mary, Mother of God, appearing in the world. For a list of the ones sanctioned in one way or another by the Roman Catholic Church, see <https://media.ascensionpress.com/2020/05/30/the-ultimate-guide-to-marian-apparitions/>.

Just pause here for a moment and consider: A man from a context and situation that is routinely made invisible persistently seeks an audience with those in high power. He is cold, hungry, worried for his family and friends, struggling to make his voice heard in a setting that consistently oppresses him. This is where I begin to hear echoes of the Mary of Luke's Gospel. A young woman not yet married, a peasant finding herself pregnant in a culture in which that is cause for certain punishment.

---

*Have you ever found yourself in a place or situation for which you have no words to speak of the God who sustains you?*

---

Roman Catholics tell this story of Juan Diego in part because it reminds us that God promises to be on the side of those who are hurting, those who are oppressed. It brings to mind the witness of Mary and Elizabeth, because it is a story that reminds us that while church and state authorities are often oblivious to people on the margins, God never is.

In Juan Diego's case, on that third encounter with the mysterious woman, he sees roses growing near her—roses of all colors, in an abundance that is impossible for the depths of December. The glowing woman asks him to gather up the roses and take them with him when he next speaks to the bishop.

Juan Diego carries them to the bishop, and this time as he once again tells the bishop to build a church on the mountain, a church where all of the Nahuatl people can gather, he throws open his cloak and the roses pour onto the ground in front of the bishop and his assembled community. Not only are the roses a miraculous sign in the midst of winter, but imprinted on the length and breadth of his cloak is the very image of the woman he has encountered.<sup>6</sup>

It is a powerful sign. An incarnate one. An experience beyond rational knowing that comes as beauty and abundance in the midst of coldest winter and stark hierarchical power. This sign finally breaks

<sup>6</sup> If you do a search for Our Lady of Guadalupe images, you will find they all have in common a cloak with roses on it, and a peasant at her feet.

open the hard heart of the bishop, and a church is built into which all of the Nahuatl people are welcomed.

This story has been shared over many centuries (Juan Diego lived in the 1530s), and it has fired the imagination of Catholic (and indeed many other Christian) communities who have told it. Its resonance with the gospel, particularly the profound conviction that God embraces those most humble, those most at the margins, has kept hope alive in multiple communities of people, including many who have been hurt or silenced by institutional religious authorities.

The resonance and emphasis held in these communities have to do with solidarity with the oppressed, not the building of a church. It is a story that offers critique of those in power while holding out hope that they can change. The story is usually also combined with the nativity stories in the liturgical season of Advent because the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe is December 12.

I need to point out here that readers of this journal are likely part of what we might call “institutional religious authorities.” Are we open to the profound beauty to be encountered on the margins? Can we hear the persistent voices crying out?

I know that on a Lutheran faculty, I am frequently reminded of the dangers of “reading into the Bible,” of somehow bringing extraneous meanings to a text. It is worth distinguishing between being brought into a story through identification and thus stretching your experience and imagination, and the direct address that comes from God. And certainly, in a world in which Christian meaning-making is too often hijacked in the service of nationalism, white supremacy, and so many other forms of structural oppression, it is worth being very cautious.

I think the line between “direct address” and “identifying with the story” may be somewhat blurry, or at least it is relatively easy for us as human beings to tune out the Spirit and to tune in only our own limited meanings. For this reason, Roman Catholics do not rely only on our own individual interpretations, but seek out communal, collective interpretation to extend, to contradict, and to validate our meaning-making.

The church routinely sets out guidelines for authenticating visitations of Mary, as well as encounters with saints. There is an entire apparatus at the Vatican whose purpose is to listen to witnesses and

adjudicate their experiences.<sup>7</sup> In large measure, those guidelines assert that the gospel proclaims to us God's love, a love so deep and so wide that God became incarnate in the most vulnerable and powerless of human beings; that God proceeded to demonstrate that love even more clearly through accompaniment of those who were isolated and even thrown out of community; that God finally endured crucifixion at the hands of the community; and that death is not the end. The authenticated witness of the saints, of Mary, is a witness to this love that extends beyond death and endures forever.

We Catholics and many other Christians hear the gospel proclamation and then tell additional stories, in this case the story of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe—a story that reminds us that God loves the most vulnerable and powerless. As Mary's song proclaims:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and the rich sent away empty.

The gospel breaks us open, draws us beyond institutional forms of power into identification with God's power, urges us to joy, prompts witness. The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe invites us to personal recognition. We rejoice in the Incarnation, and in the heart of that mystery we proclaim Christ's presence. We hear the witness of Mary and Elizabeth, and we imagine ourselves into the story of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe.

---

*The gospel breaks us open, draws us beyond institutional forms of power into identification with God's power, urges us to joy, prompts witness. The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe invites us to personal recognition.*

---

Can you see yourself in this story? Who are you? Are you the tired and cold peasant struggling to make it over the mountain? Are you the arrogant and imperious bishop, the religious leader who

<sup>7</sup> Find an excellent introduction in Deirdre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).



sees what they know, rather than being open to new knowing that changes what you can see? Maybe you're simply a bystander in the bishop's court?

Lee Ann Bell and team have identified four kinds of stories that people often tell: stock or dominant stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and transforming stories.<sup>8</sup> I believe that we Christians get ourselves into trouble when we tell stories that align the gospel with cultural dominance: stock stories of nationalism, for instance, or of racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression. Many scholars have come to recognize the important roles women play in the Bible, pointing out stories that typically would have been concealed but that have remained in the canon in part because they embody centuries of resistance to dominance.<sup>9</sup>

Many of us tell the stories of encounters with Our Lady as stories of transformation. We want to witness to God's promises in ways that invite recognition with those who are most powerless, those on the margins. At the same time, such stories offer hope that even religious authorities can change.

But perhaps these stories still feel too alien to you, too superstitious, or too tied up with church dogma. Maybe there are other stories that come to your ears, stories that offer joy and witness to love, that function in compelling ways for you. I have friends for whom the stories of the Harry Potter universe offer deep resonance and ways of engaging the embodiment of God's justice and joy in friendship.<sup>10</sup> Others find the science fiction of Lois McMaster Bujold<sup>11</sup> and N. K. Jemisin<sup>12</sup> or the mysteries of Louise Penny<sup>13</sup> to offer powerful resonance that sustains for them a belief in God's promises.

As my colleague Gracia Grindal points out, "Stories demand our serious attention because they draw us into a scene and cause us

<sup>8</sup> Lee Ann Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The book that first helped me to see this is Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> See Patricia Lyons, *Teaching Faith with Harry Potter: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators for Multigenerational Faith Formation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> The Chalion Universe books are a good place to encounter Lois McMaster Bujold's "quintarian" description of God. Begin with *The Curse of Chalion* (New York: Eos, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See N. K. Jemisin's *The Inheritance Trilogy* (London: Orbit Books, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The first in her series featuring Inspector Gamache is *Still Life* (New York: St. Martin's, 2008).

to treat the grand issues of human life. Wonder is at least one of the first things a religious imagination should foster, not simply pedestrian understanding.”<sup>14</sup>

Whoever you are, stories can invite you to identify with this overwhelming promise of love and, in doing so, open up to the mystery of God incarnate, here and now in the world. The Holy Spirit is always breathing stories of resistance and stories of transformation. When we open ourselves to the Incarnation, to God appearing in the most unlikely of places, to God becoming human as a newborn infant, and thus to imagining what it might have been like to be Mary, we can break open our own hearts. Entering into the mystery changes how we know, and thus changes what and whom we can see.

In our current world, as the bitter winds of climate catastrophe blow around us, as the winds of pandemic, of loss, of despair, of political viciousness surround us, God’s love opens us up through the mystery of the Incarnation.

We need to face the fear of being broken open, to know and to see in new ways. We need to see the hope that lies even in the bleakness, and we need to be open to the beauty that is all around us, the beauty that dominance refuses to see, but that the Incarnation demands we know and thus love.

To return to the text with which I began, Elizabeth says:

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

And Mary responds:

My soul magnifies the Lord; and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

We need, in the midst of this bleak world, in the midst of our despair, to live deeply into this witness and to allow its joy to spill over into our lives and our actions. This is the *kerygma* I hold tightly to and live into through the stories of Mary.

Finally, I am also aware that my engagement with these stories grows from a long history of immersion in Christian communities that honor Mary and work to embody her compassion and justice.

<sup>14</sup> Gracia Grindal, “The End Is Everything,” *Dialog* 36, no. 2 (1997): 99.

There are all too many other ways in which the story of Mary, the mother of God, has been used to silence and oppress communities. Even the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe can be turned into a consumer holiday that refuses to engage the justice and wisdom at the heart of the biblical text.<sup>15</sup> But as my Lutheran friends are always fond of pointing out, we humans are simultaneously saint and sinner, with a propensity to turn even the most liberative stories into oppressive ones. I urge you to resist such a tendency, and instead to join Roman Catholics the world over in telling stories of Mary that emphasize God's heart for the marginalized, and indeed God's wonder at all of creation. ⊕

*MARY E. HESS is professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary. Her most recent book, coauthored with Stephen Brookfield, is *Becoming a White Antiracist* (Stylus, 2021). She has written the blog *Tensegrities* since 2003 (<https://meh.religioused.org/web/tensegrities/>).*

<sup>15</sup> Recently, one of our students wrote an eloquent master of arts thesis on precisely this topic, noting the many ways in which Our Lady of Guadalupe can be exploited. See Sally Dominguez, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Myth, Metaphor, Mary," successfully defended at Luther Seminary in spring 2022.