

Mary, can you teach us to be courageous?

By [Kendra Weddle](#)

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My stereo is always on overdrive in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. My favorite is anything by Mannheim Steamroller even after our German exchange student last year told me no one from Germany actually listens to them. That's OK. I'm willing to be different.

Whatever our individual preferences, music adds a festive component to Christmas. Who doesn't hum along with most any tune when touring the lights or wrapping gifts or making that special dessert you only have at Christmas?

As I recently looked over my Christmas selection, I was struck by a song that became popular a few years ago and continues to be one I frequently hear: "Mary Did You Know." I appreciate the imaginative wondering about what Mary might have thought about the baby she brought into this world, especially because, at least as Protestants, we have given Mary short shrift. Oh sure, she figures into our manger scenes and we recognize her once or twice a year when we celebrate Christmas and Easter, but generally I don't think we take her very seriously.

In Luke's Gospel (and we have to focus on Luke because Matthew centers his account on Joseph while Mark and John don't even mention Jesus' birth), Gabriel, the angel, speaks to Mary forthrightly. This visit doesn't take place in a dream or a vision, as often is the case in biblical narratives, but when Mary is wide awake and thinking clearly. The narrator suggests Mary was engaged when this conversation occurred, and that she was a virgin. While common understandings of the term *virgin* today mean someone who has not had vaginal sex, the original Greek is not as clear. The term could also mean young girl or woman. So, at best, there is ambiguity about Mary's status.

At any rate, Mary did not immediately respond to Gabriel. It is easy to imagine her hesitancy. What does anyone say in response to "The Lord is with you?" But when Mary heard the next statement, along with assertion that she would have a son who would be called the Son of the Most High and he would occupy the throne of David,

she found her voice. How could this happen, she wanted to know, since she was not pregnant? And even though Gabriel avoided answering her question, instead saying the Holy Spirit would be present, Mary responded that she was willing to participate with God's intention.

Such a decision involved autonomy often not recognized in Mary. Engaged to Joseph at the time, she was already considered his property. Before that she was owned by her father. That Mary did not seek permission from Joseph (or from her father, for that matter) conveys her independence. She apparently did not feel compelled to check with her fiancé or father in order to respond to Gabriel. Instead, she considered his claims and acceded to them without following appropriate social protocol.

Additionally, when she traveled to meet Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, Mary broke into song. Without priestly intervention or a male religious authority, Mary understood the spirit of God's good news. Echoing Hannah's song recorded in 1 Samuel 2, Mary must have been shaped not only by the gracious righteousness of God, but also by the women who went before her. Surely Mary knew by heart the ancient stories of Abraham and Moses, was familiar with leaders such as David and Solomon. Yet, when Mary spoke of her faith in God, revealing her understanding of God, she used the words of Hannah, another woman who played an integral part in God's grand narrative by mothering Samuel.

Mary's song, often called Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1, conveys the perspective underpinning Jesus' actions in the gospels. It is a theology of reversals, where the strong are made weak, and the weak become strong, where the powerful are brought low and the hungry are filled. We can imagine Mary knew the lows all too well. She had been on the receiving end of social systems that disregarded groups of people: women, the poor, the sick, the hungry.

Her positive response to Gabriel surely was motivated by what she understood about God. From Hannah she knew God's dream for humanity included freedom and liberation for all people, not just for a select few. She understood faith in God meant trusting that God would be faithful, working with God to make life more abundant for all. Mary, the lowly young woman, was the perfect person to give birth to God's desire for humanity; in her risky decision, she showed the courage necessary to choose the better way. Mary had no idea what was in store for her as Jesus' mother, and yet she was willing to take a chance on life with God. Her determination to

cooperate without knowing the exact contours of the journey provide us today with an excellent example of what is required of us. Whatever the road entails, we can be sure it will be bumpy, because following Jesus means going into the potholes and crevices of social injustice in order to make the rough places smooth.

So maybe it is good to wonder what Mary may have known about Jesus, but it is more in tune with who she was to muster up our own courage; to join with her, creating God's dream of love, hospitality, and especially, justice.

Perhaps we—as Christians in America—can start by re-evaluating our nationalism that has somehow meant endorsing torture as an acceptable practice. According to [The Washington Post](#), in the light of what we are learning about the CIA's report on torture most Christians do not actually take exception to such inhumane acts, and instead think there are instances in which it is justified.

I suppose Mary—and Jesus, for that matter—have their own imaginative challenge trying to figure out how we could veer so far off course as to have, in the words of Karen Armstrong, lost the entire plot. Maybe during this Christmas season, the Christ-child will birth in us a renewed heart of compassion: to love God and neighbor.

*Originally posted at [Ain't I a Woman?](#)*