

Benediction by Becca Stevens, Founder of Thistle Farms

CLAIRE K. MCKEEVER-BURGETT

Blessed Are the Women

Naming and Reclaiming
Women's Stories from the Gospels



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PRESS

Mary

The First Supper

Luke 2:1–20

Content Warning: Birth

HERSTORY

And she pondered all of these things in her heart.¹⁴

It was quiet but for the bleating of a goat and the soft suckle of your lips on my nipple, the First Supper. Your father slept in the corner of the barn on a pillow of hay. After stitching my body where it tore, Dinah, my midwife, left, weary from attending my long, slow labor.

I lay awake, bleeding, and desperate for something to take away the pain. The experience of labor is like wave upon wave of hell. Once the baby has left the body, there comes a new wave, a softer one, but still a wave crashing upon the shore, whispering quietly, “You survived . . . but just barely.”

Every cell tingles with this awareness and shudders at the thought of it. Death was so close I could taste it. But then life was so close too. Does the body quake at the reality of them both? You can’t have one without the other.

I was so tired all I could do was lie there and stare, acutely aware of my surroundings and simultaneously unhinged from this earth, floating up and beyond whatever life this was, whatever lives we had become.

¹⁴ Luke 2:19.

I remember the smell of lavender and blood. Both soothed me—lavender with its sweet and calming scent; blood with its awakening.

I didn't cry when I first saw you; I only gasped, desperate for air. Though I labored for hours, the moment of your arrival earthside came like a shot. Dinah and your father had to tear you from me; that's how reluctant either of us were to let go.

Covered in blood—was it yours or mine or both of ours?—they placed you on my chest. You screamed. I marveled: *I created this?*

Dark hair. Dark eyes. Whoever said there is no light in the darkness? Because you illumined that night with your darkness, and I began to see that making our way in the dark is all there ever is. I began to see darkness as beautiful. You taught me this, dear one. You.

Your father wasn't meant to be there. Matters of labor and birth, blood and uterus were typically withheld from men, thought to be spaces where only women dwelt, spaces understood as unclean. Yet there he was, holding my hand, watching me bleed—another one of the night's tiny miracles. Your father—presently, patiently—helped me bring you into this world.

I had a month left before I thought you'd arrive. The plan was to be back at home so that my mother-in-law and sisters could tend to me as I rode wave upon wave of contraction and pain.

Plans are for fools. Wisdom laughs in their faces. In the end, all we have is a hope and a prayer, a kneeling down and a letting go.

They say shepherds visited us that night, but their visit came later, after the days of cleansing had passed, when the law considered me pure again. How I could be considered impure after bringing you into this world is beyond me. Through sweat and blood, through broken flesh and tilting bone, it is all pure power to me.

No, that night, it was just us. And a host of mother saints cheering us on, bidding me, "Push," and holding you, "Hush."

That was the first night I remember thinking: *I am never alone, no matter how alone I may feel.* This same thought would return to me throughout your life—at your leaving, your preaching, your dying. What of this didn't break me in two?

It was as if your birth prepared me to rely on Mother God and gave me practice for what was to come, the foreboding of the body-breaking, blood-shedding miracle that you were only able to endure because I endured it first.

Of course, none of this was coherent the night you were born. All that was clear was you and your darkening light as you suckled my breast. Only me and my stinging, dull pain. Only my body and yours, bruised and bloodied, lying on the floor of a nameless barn on the outskirts of Bethlehem. With a bleating goat and a soft snore from your father.

It was there that not only you were made; I was made too. Not so much as your mother (though that was a title I claimed joyfully), but more as a survivor, as one who came face-to-face with death and lived.¹⁵

LITURGY FOR NIGHT PRAYER

OPENING

If you are gathered with others, position yourselves in a circle. Place a candle in the center. If you are alone, light a candle as a sign of connection to the circle of women saints who join you, even now, as you pray.

Opening Prayer

On this Holy Night, Mother God, we pray together in the spirit of young Mary, whose song echoes throughout Jesus' ministry, whose fire and passion, conviction and grace lead us to light and life. Help us turn the world upside down. Help us join in the groans of labor to bring forth life anew. Help us fan the flames of your justice. Help us burn what needs burning. Help us mend what needs mending. And on this most holy of nights, help us honor Mary and all who mother the world into love. **Amen.**

Silence

¹⁵ Parts of Mary's story and liturgy below first appeared in *The Other Journal*, December 13, 2021.

Prayer of Confession

Mother God who sustained Mary, who sustains us all—

We confess that we have done a poor job of caring for mothers, of listening to and holding them, of honoring and celebrating their stories, of bowing down at the feet of those who bring us into the world and keep it spinning. We confess that without Mary we would not have Jesus. We confess that without Jesus we would not truly live.

Forgive us, O God of Mary, for our ignorance and our disregard, and help us to follow the light of the flame into places that honor and bless the ones from whom we come, the bodies, broken, from which we burst forth. Help us honor. Help us love. Help us, Mother God, we pray.

Forgiveness + Grace

God shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next. Thanks be to Mary. Thanks be to God. **Alleluia!**
Amen.

Psalm 96 (inspired by the Common English Bible translation)

O sing a new song!

Sing a song

of bearing forth new life,

of being saved by the God of Mary.

**Declare the God of Mary's glory everywhere—
in birthing rooms and at communion tables,
on deathbeds and at riversides.**

Families of all kinds,

rest in God's gentleness and strength;

trust that you are safe in the God of Mary's

loving presence.

Say to everyone, "The God of Mary is among us!

Though the earth moves, Her love remains.

Though the nations war, Her peace remains.
 Though the women suffer, Her joy remains.”
 Both heaven and earth dance together before
 the God of Mary.

**The seas sing, the fields undulate, the trees sway—
 the God of Mary is coming
 with pleasure, with ease, with comfort, with love.**

Psalm Prayer

We rest this holy night in the God of Mary, entrusting
 our lives to Her love. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1–20

Silence for Reflection

Song of Praise

“Blessed Is She”

Words and music by Claire K. McKeever–Burgett

The following song can be sung several times following the practice of meditative singing, the repetition of which offers a deeper connection to God and to the women who are to be followed and whose stories are to be believed.

Bless-ed is she, the one who be-lieves. Bless-ed is she, the
 one who be-lieves. Bless-ed are the wom-en who be - lieve.

Contemporary Connection

Take a few moments to watch and listen to “Mary” by Patty Griffin, performed by Patty Griffin and Natalie Maines.¹⁶ Imagine Mary singing this song to her child, Jesus.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOxpvKuEruk>

The Prayer of Mary (inspired by Luke 1:46–55)

O Mother God, we glorify You.

From the depths of our beings, we rejoice in You,

Our Deliverer.

As You show mercy to us, help us to show mercy to others.

As You honor our bodies, help us to honor all other bodies.

As You scatter the deceitful and remove tyrants from their thrones,

help us to work for justice and shalom.

Fill the hungry with good things.

Show us what is enough.

Deliver us from pride into mercy.

Deliver us from evil into love.

For Yours is the birthing room, the power, the vulnerability,

the glory, and the love,

eternally here, eternally now.

Amen.

Silence

Depart in peace and quiet to love and serve women and the world. Amen.

REFLECTION AND CURIOSITY

The following questions are meant to deepen and expand, invite and beckon thoughtful, compassionate, curious responses to the story and liturgy of Mary. Whether playing with these questions on your own or in a group setting, carve out space for journaling, collaging, or painting in response. If engaging in a group discussion, choose one or two questions, at most, to hold at the center of your sacred circle.

1. What thoughts and feelings arise when reading Mary's birthing story? In what ways does your story connect with Mary's story?

2. When reading and praying along with Mary, what sensations do you notice in your body?
3. What is it like to pray to Mother God?
4. What do you know about how you came into the world? What is your birth story?

PUBLIC WITNESS

Black mothers and birthing people often do not receive the care they need and deserve when trying to get pregnant, when giving birth, and when healing afterward. Birth justice is about changing this reality.

Black Mamas Matter Alliance is a powerful, Black-women-led organization that centers Black mamas and birthing people in advocacy, research, power-building, and culture-shifting for Black parental health, rights, and justice.

On a global scale, **Every Mother Counts** seeks to make pregnancy and childbirth safe for every mother, everywhere.

Learn more about these organizations and programs, and discover more about organizations in your area doing the work of advocacy, research, empowerment, and care for Black maternal health. Connect. Learn. Give. Grow.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://blackmamasmatter.org/> and <https://everymothercounts.org/>

