

CAROL HOWARD MERRITT

I
Am
Mary

Advent Devotional



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*To my mom,
Linda Carol Gresham Howard,
who spent one Christmas Eve
giving birth to me*

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Dear Reader,

I have wanted to write this devotional for seventeen years, after I experienced Advent while pregnant with my daughter, Calla. With each kick, I embodied Advent longing.

After the birth of our child, so many portrayals of Mary seemed trite, like washed-out watercolor versions of what must have happened. Where was the pain of childbirth? Where was the messy, fleshy experience of incarnation? Why didn't we hear more about the oppression women faced? I wondered how we could speak easily of the graphic brutality of the crucifixion, and yet be squeamish about the torn flesh and blood of birth. It made no sense. Until I realized that I had been told this story only through the experience of men, who had never felt the nausea and weakness of pregnancy, the pain and labor of childbirth. So I was grateful to explore what Mary might have been going through and imagine how she might have looked back and told the story.

As a woman I was able to explore these experiences; what I wasn't able to understand was the intersectional reality of the poverty and racism that Mary faced. For this, I'm grateful for the work of Dr. Jordan Ryan, particularly his sermon "Mary on the Margins," which he preached at University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

The devotional is divided into weeks and days. On the Sunday of each week, you can follow the candle lighting liturgy provided in the back of the book. The services can be used privately, with your family, or with a congregation. Then you may read a devotional for each day.

As we enter this Advent season together, may we learn to long and love deeply, and may we get a glimpse of what it means to bear God.

Peace,
Carol

Luke 1:26–38

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, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "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. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her.

Confusion

Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

I was yanking on the weeds threatening to choke our harvest when I noticed something moving on the horizon and stood up. Shading my eyes, I saw the silhouette of a man walking directly toward me. As he came closer, his gaze rested on me, and he smiled in recognition.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” he said.

What? I cocked my head. *What did he just say?* And a moment later: *Why me?* The stranger greeted me like a queen, but I knew my position well. I smelled like roots, earth, and sweat. I was a lowly servant, a teenager from Nazareth, engaged to a carpenter named Joseph.¹ My years had been arranged and set out before me in monotonous order, just like Joseph neatly positioned the tools of his trade on his work bench. Ordinary, manageable tasks filled my life—planting, shopping, cooking, and cleaning. There was nothing exalted about my status or any of the responsibilities before me.

As those thorny weeds pricked my palm, my confusion grew. I wondered what this stranger’s greeting could possibly mean.

O God, help us when we are jolted out of our comforting daily habits. May we be open to the chaos and wonder that your divine confusion brings.

Fear

“Do not be afraid, Mary.”

Standing alone before that strange man, my heart palpitated, my breath quickened, and my confusion turned to fear. *How did he know my name? Had he been watching me?* I couldn't help it: Enslaved and conquered women filled my people's history, and my elders warned me about how it happened. They whispered about the rapes.²

The messenger must have seen the sudden panic in my eyes, for before my anxiety could escalate, he said, “Don't be afraid, Mary.” His voice moved like honey and he smelled like smoke and blossoms. I forced myself to look up, and his face was ancient, knowing, and kind. His name was Gabriel. My breath steadied as I took his advice.

My fear wasn't all bad. It had served me well in the past and would aid me in the years to come. Most women knew to be wary of unknown men, and when they became mothers, their intuition heightened even more. Moms predicted the danger of a falling hammer, a stray nail, or a stranger's gaze.

With Gabriel's greeting, God asked me to move into a blessed life. But it would never be a safe life. People often threatened our family, and repeatedly we fled in danger. I needed that swig of courage, though, so I swallowed the messenger's words: “Don't be afraid.”

Comforting God, thank you for warnings and intuitions that prepare us for possible dangers. Give us courage to welcome all the blessings you have in store for us.

Favored

“You have found favor with God.”

It was easy to spot those who led an honored life, but I certainly didn't have any of those marks of privilege. As a Jewish woman, my people had been conquered and colonized, enslaved and displaced. Hostile nations and soldiers ripped us from our land and our loves. They tore our families apart, extracting the intellectuals, scattering the artists, and persecuting the religious.

In hopes of a simpler and safer life, my family had moved from Judea to Nazareth, far away from the political center of Jerusalem. We worked the brittle land without relief. Most of the hillside homes in Nazareth were like ours. They were primitive—domesticated caves or dwellings constructed with field stones.

Each time I left my town, I became aware of the sound of my words. My accent set me apart from other Jews and caused them to shake their heads and ask, “Can *anything* good come out of Nazareth?”³

Even though I was poor and hadn't accomplished much in my life, this man Gabriel had said to me, “You have found favor with God.” And I began to breathe in the stunning news that God had chosen me.

Loving God, we thank you that you see those who live their lives on the margins.

Candle Lighting Services



Here Am I

Reading

Luke 1:35–38

Reflection

Later in Luke’s story (11:27–28), Jesus was teaching, and a woman in the crowd began to cry out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!”

And Jesus said, “Blessed indeed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”¹⁸

There is a connection between Mary’s openness and ours, a parallel between her womb and our hearing, her nourishment and our faithfulness.

Mary is not a handmaid, a servant being violated for her reproductive organs. Rather, Mary responded, “Here am I.” She is an empowered mother, a loving and consenting co-creator in the birth. When Mary offers up her body, she goes before us, showing us how we can also open up our lives to the abundance that God has for us. When Mary suckles Jesus, she models how we can nurture a life in God, being surrounded and embraced by God’s presence.

As Meister Eckhart wrote, through Mary’s example the Son of God is always being born in us.¹⁹

Lighting

As we light this candle, we open ourselves to God’s spark. We echo Mary’s words, “Here am I,” as we enter this season of painful longing and abundant possibilities.

(Light the first candle.)

Prayer

God our creator, open to us to your spark, your life, and your vitality. Be born in us today. Amen.