

David's Short Story, "Mary," read by Jennifer Tannel

Good morning! What a pleasure to be in your church. I remember when Jesus spoke at our hometown synagogue, in Nazareth, you know. Oh, it was such a special day for our family! Oh, yes, I should tell you. I am Mary. Just Mary. Some call me Mary, Queen of Heaven.

I can be honored by such titles and still think "that's a bit much." To be thought of as royalty. Or a goddess, no, that is not me; it is not me, however kindly intended. I well understand that there are people who need me to be what I am not. So, I try to be gracious, and humbled, while still a bit embarrassed, if not mortified. It is more than enough just being Jesus's mother.

Your Bible, I should say *our* Bible, is not my story nor commentary on my life. I am a passing figure. The few times I appear I am perplexed, astounded, serene, proud, worried, agitated, sorrowful, present on the periphery. That takes me from Christmas to Good Friday, a decent but abrupt summary. Then I disappear, not from the story but from the writing. Others have sought to fill in the missing spaces.

Some have tried to humanize me, but in their own image. My own humanity doesn't seem enough. Yes, I know what culture has done with me. One writer portrayed me as an elderly, bitter grump, spiteful toward the Disciples and the Gospel writers and the saints for their grandiose vision of Jesus's heroics. Another made me out to be an emotional, hysterical shrew, consumed by the loss of my son, and blaming everyone. Self-centered, selfish, self-absorbed in my sorrow, carrying it to my dying day.

Well, "bitter, spiteful, hysterical shrew" certainly humanizes me. I don't fault the writer. He imagines how he would have

felt to face what I faced. He may have himself right, but that is not me. The weeks leading to my son's killing were stressful. *I was there.* The tension was unbearable. *I was there.* The fear you could taste. *I was there.* The pressure was building. *I was there.* The betrayal was shattering. *I was there.* The death was excruciating. *I was there.* So, I do not need someone else telling me what I should feel. *I was there.*

What many people perhaps cannot appreciate (no, that is too harsh), let's say cannot understand, is what Joseph and I were able to understand. No, Joseph was not there that awful Crucifixion day; he was gone from this earth. But we shared that day together in our own way, as we had from the beginning. We were able to understand, in our own way, that Jesus was a gift to us, a responsibility, a duty, a danger. All wrapped up in those swaddling clothes and laid in that manger we hear so much about.

That is what you want to hear about, isn't it? Christmas. Manger and stable, Wise Men and Shepherds, the Wandering Star and Virgin Birth. When the whole story was beautiful and miraculous. But the Cross was born that Christmas Day as surely as our son was born that Christmas Day. I have heard parents say, "My son was born with a ball in his hand," or a harp, or a sword, a clue to his destiny. A mystic said that Jesus was born with a Cross in his hand, his destiny already grasped.

Not that I saw.

Each wonder deserves its own awe, I say. And those birthing days in Bethlehem had more than enough miracles and mystery to keep me awed my whole life. Maybe that is why the Cross did not destroy me.

Joseph and I did appreciate, and now it is not too strong a word, we really did appreciate the majesty of those moments. "My soul magnifies the Lord!" Remember those words? I didn't just say them. They didn't come out of nowhere. I really meant

it. I mean it even now. "My soul magnifies the Lord." That has been my purpose all my life.

Joseph and I—I know I say that a lot, don't I? I must need you to know that Joseph and I were in this together. We have been separated in religion, but we were not separated in life, nor death, nor after death. Joseph and I. Repeat after me:
Joseph and I.

Of course, he may tell his story his own way, and that is proper. We experienced it together differently. Does that make sense? Yes or no, that's how it was. Together, differently.

Shall we, now? Yes. The Virgin Birth. A head-scratcher, isn't it? A roadblock. Anti-woman, I hear, anti-sex, proof of original sin. You are overthinking.

Virgin. Birth. That is how I became elevated to Mary, Queen of Heaven. My own Virgin Birth a sequel to my own Immaculate Conception through my dear mother, Saint Anne, with my dear father sidelined like my own beloved. I don't pretend to understand all this. Purity run amok, one could say, diminishing pregnancy and birth to something unseemly.

Then, much later, Jesus's Ascension to heaven parallels my Assumption. Different words, same idea—a seamless transition to heaven. All a piece. People believe I was too pure to be sullied by intimacy. Too holy to be sullied by death's decay. Lost in translation, I might say.

All right, Virgin Birth. To start with, I was young. That's the way it was in those days. There were two kinds of women. Child-producing age. Not child-producing age. The not-child-producing ages were sandwiched around the child-producers. When you got to be a certain age, you were expected to produce children with the man determined for you.

Joseph was much older. Don't read too much into that; it is the way it was. An older man, established in his work, accepted in his village, known in his synagogue, ready to provide. Child-provider marries child-producer. It was the way of the times.

Your world may be better in many ways, I grant you that. But this was our way, and it worked well for us. And don't imagine there was no love. Joseph's entire presence in our Christmas miracle was daily proof of love. We knew it.

Miracle, I said it. Yes, it was. Believe me, at my age at that time everything about marriage, sex, pregnancy, birth—it was all mystery wrapped in wonder, everything about it a miracle. Sure, when our elders were not nearby, we girls giggled about it and whispered. But the whole process of life, especially the beginning, the creation of life, it was a great unknown.

Into that unknown entered God's plan for us, for Joseph and me.

You want an explanation, don't you? Will you accept voices and visions, angels and visitations? Will you accept seeing and hearing and believing what others did not see or hear and most will not believe? Will you accept that no one touched me, and no one took advantage of me, and no one abused me? Will you accept that whatever happened was overwhelming and beautiful and holy? You know what holy means, don't you? Set apart. Perfect.

It was perfect.

Joseph and I, we each understood that we were carrying within us—yes, us—a story born of God. We knew. That is the story that carried us along through the hardest days, the best days, the troublesome days, the brightest days. And the worst days. It, he, Jesus, was God's story.

That is what bore me along through the horror of that Cross.

Christmas was the birth pangs of death, excruciating in every breath. As it is for all of us, forgive me for saying so, death being as universal as birth. We don't think such thoughts at the birth of life. I certainly didn't. Such thoughts come later. But for me they came too soon, that awful day on the Cross.

Yes, I knew even then the story was not at its end. My son's birth began his journey toward death. My son's death began his journey toward life. And ours. What more could a mother ask for? If, after all these years, my soul is still magnifying my Lord, then I humbly welcome your praise, when you proclaim:

*"Hail Mary,
Full of Grace.
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of
thy womb, Jesus."*

What more could a mother ask?
