



THE STORY OF MARY

These moments in Mary's life offer us the opportunity to learn from her and emulate her response to God. Mary teaches us how to lead our lives in faith and hope and love.

Mary was a young Jewish woman who lived in Nazareth in what is now Israel. The early traditions of the Christian community named Mary's parents Anne and Joachim. Because of Mary's faithfulness as a Jewish woman, we can imagine that her parents were also devout Jews and raised their daughter in accordance with their faith. Their tender care and devotion helped Mary to grow into the confident, yet humble young woman who would say yes to God.

Because of the time and area in which Mary lived, we can make some pretty good guesses about what her life was like. Mary was probably a peasant. Life in a rural village of the Middle East such as Nazareth would have been filled with hard work. Most women and many men were illiterate.

During this time period, Mary's homeland was occupied by the Romans. It was a difficult life under Roman rule, filled with violence and poverty. The Jews looked for a Messiah who would liberate them from the oppressive rule of Caesar. Mary notes the injustice of the world around her in her *Magnificat* when she recalls God's promise to "[throw] down the rulers from their thrones, but [lift] up the lowly." (Luke 1:46–55)

As a woman deeply rooted in the Jewish faith, Mary trusted that God heard the cries of his people and would "remember his mercy." (Luke 1:54) Too often we forget that Mary and Jesus were Jews. In her article "In Search of the Real Mary"¹ theologian Elizabeth Johnson says that too often we "bleach" Mary of her Jewishness: "We've done this ethnically by turning her swarthy Jewish complexion into fair skin and blonde hair and blue eyes. But we've also done this religiously by turning her deeply rooted Jewish piety into that of a latter-day Catholic. She wasn't." This, Johnson notes, "does no honor to [Mary's] memory."

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, "In Search of the Real Mary" in *Catholic Update* (May 2001).
<http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0501.asp>

Mary would have been about 15 years old when she received God’s message that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. She said yes to God and became pregnant with God’s Son. This posed quite a problem in Mary’s society. Because she was unmarried, she could have been killed as an adulteress. An angel told Joseph that his betrothed Mary was pregnant with a child conceived through the Holy Spirit. Joseph listened to God’s messenger and did not leave Mary or shame her. Instead he married Mary and protected her. In the last month of her pregnancy, Mary and Joseph had to make a long and difficult journey to Bethlehem. After Jesus was born, they became refugees, escaping to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod’s soldiers. They lived as refugees for a while until it was safe to return to their homeland and settle in Nazareth.

In this setting, Mary and Joseph raised Jesus to be a faithful Jew, aware of the injustices in the world, but believing in God’s justice, mercy, and love—believing that there is another way. By doing so, they changed the world.

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