

Son of Mary

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 14, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 1:26-56](#)

Additional reading: "[Gabriel's Annunciation](#)," by Jan Richardson

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To say, "I am a Christian," is to say, "I am a follower of Jesus." Here's the thing: how you follow Jesus depends very much on who you think Jesus is.

During this Advent and Christmas worship series, we are looking at the identities the Christmas carol "What Child Is This?" gives to Jesus. On the first Sunday of Advent, we talked about how calling Jesus, "The King," (as in "This, this is Christ the king ...") means that Caesar is not. Last week, we talked about how Jesus as "the silent Word" needs us to speak up for justice. Today, we look at the title, "Son of Mary."

Jesus is frequently referred to as "the son of God" or "the son of Man" in the gospels. It turns out there is only one reference to Jesus as "the son of Mary" in the whole Bible. It's in the 6th chapter of the gospel according to Mark, when Jesus is back in Nazareth, preaching in his hometown synagogue. His neighbors are stunned by what he has to say.

This is how the passage is rendered in the NRSVue: "... many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him."¹

The impact of saying that Jesus is the son of Mary lies very much in who you think Mary was. Mary seems to have been important to William Chatterton Dix, the poet who penned the lyrics to our focus Christmas carol. The final word of the refrain, which is repeated after each verse, refers to Jesus as "the son of Mary." But I'm less interested in who Mary was for Mr. Dix than I am in who Mary is for me. So, if you'll indulge me ...

One of the things we noticed at the Monday Afternoon Bible Study last week is that we don't know much about Mary from the canonical gospels. She's there at the beginning of Jesus' life, and at the end. There are a few stories about what happened in between: there's the birth narrative in Matthew's gospel, in which Mary plays a very passive role; there's the flight to Egypt in Matthew; the story of the adolescent Jesus staying at the Temple when his parents left to return home in Luke; Mary and some of her children come to bring Jesus home because some people think that Jesus has gone crazy, which is told in all three of the synoptic gospels. This last story says that Mary had other children, so we know that about her, too.

¹ Mark 6:2-3, *NRSVue*. It might be worth noting that Jesus is referred to as "the son of Joseph" twice in the gospel of John, 1:45 and 6:42.

And then there's the story we heard today. I think it is the richest, in terms of what it tells us about Mary. And we'll get to it in a bit. First, let's look at how Mary has been presented to us.

Dr. Ally Kateusz is a scholar who has studied Mary and early Christian women. She discovered that early depictions of Mary (the one the left is from the 300s) show her in a religious leadership role. Notice that she is standing upright, "looking straight at the audience, fearless, often with her arms raised in a liturgical pose, or what's called the liturgical pose in art."² By the 900s, Mary starts to look more like a queen (for instance in the middle picture). And by the 1500s, Mary has become quite passive, a Mary who's meek and mild (the picture on the right). In other words, Mary moves in Christian art from being a priest or bishop who is among the people, to a queen who is unapproachable, to a passive woman who wouldn't say "boo." In the process, Mary got sanitized from a real person into a pristine symbol. She becomes "the spotless virgin or the silent, obedient mother, instead of a living, breathing woman we can actually encounter."³



You can see the transition from queen to passive woman in Leonardo da Vinci's "The Annunciation," painted in the 1470s. Notice that Mary's head is higher than the angel's and that the angel is kneeling before Mary – an appropriate way to approach a queen. This queen appears to have been reading when the angel arrived, not a particularly active activity – she is becoming more passive.



² Ally Kateusz, in an interview with Shirley Paulson, "Startling Discoveries of Ancient Christian Art Change Views of Women," *Early Christian Texts*, <https://earlychristiantexts.com/ancient-christian-art-changes-views-of-women/> (posted 20 June 2019; accessed 13 December 2025).

³ Kat Armas, "More Than Virgin, More Than Mother: Mary Beyond the Binary," *Church Anew*, <https://churchanew.org/blog/posts/kat-armas-mary-beyond-binary> (posted 10 December 2025; accessed 12 December 2025).

I find the whole notion of Mary as a queen or the silent, obedient mother ridiculous. I think Henry Ossawa Tanner's "The Annunciation" is a much more realistic Mary. And his imagination might have created a scene more ornate than Mary's reality. Mary was a peasant girl in the violently occupied territory of Galilee.



We know that some human stories don't change. Throughout the ages, anytime a territory is occupied or war-torn, women and children suffer the most, and in unimaginable ways. Kelley Nikondeha points out that Mary must have witnessed all kinds of violence. She says that Nazareth and really all of Galilee at the time of Jesus' birth were rife with riots and protests and funerals that became protests. And Rome responded to these acts of protest with the military. Those occupying forces responded with violence.

Time and again, resistance against the empire was met with an oppression that the empire seemed to think would serve as a warning, as an example to others who might rise up. The oppression only made the people more resentful and more resistant.

The Roman response was devastating, and not only to the infrastructure. Yes, buildings were destroyed. And the Romans didn't stop there. They made a habit of killing the men, carting away and enslaving the children, and abusing the women. The use of rape as a weapon of war is not a new phenomenon. Those who remained in the community still had to deal with an ongoing military presence that was known for their continued abuse of women.⁴

That was Mary's childhood reality.

When I heard Nikondeha's description of the generational violence of the Roman Empire, I couldn't help but think of the plight of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. When I heard her talk about the Romans putting down resistance by killing the men, raping the women, and enslaving the children, I couldn't help but think of the outrages Russia has perpetrated in Ukraine. In many places around the globe, Mary's childhood reality continues.

⁴ Kelley Nikondeha, author of *The First Advent in Palestine*, in an interview with Marcia McFee that is part of the *What Child IS This?* worship series materials.

And then I thought about the scene in our scripture lesson. There is Gabriel saying to Mary, “God would like to do this thing. Would you mind helping God out?” God asks for consent. God doesn’t even ask directly, knowing that to do so might make Mary feel she has no choice. God lets an angel make the request. God asks in love. This is a stark contrast of how power can be embodied.

Realizing the contrasting ways power can be embodied makes the words of the Magnificat all the more prophetic. The words become a protest song. She sings of a world that is so different from the world she knows, the world of Nazareth and of Galilee. Rome would say she sings of a world turned upside down. God would say she sings of a world turned rightside up.

A colleague shared that there are at least three times when Governments banned the public recitation of the Magnificat in the 20th century: During British rule in India, the Magnificat was banned from being sung in churches. In the 1980s, Guatemala’s government considered Mary’s song about God’s preferential option for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary, and banned it. And, after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose children disappeared during Argentina’s Dirty War, displayed the words of the Magnificat on posters across the capital, the military junta prohibited any public display of Mary’s song.⁵

This prophet, this liberator, this independent woman who knew the worst and still held onto an image of God’s best – this is the mother of Jesus. To say that Jesus is the son of Mary is to invite Mary to form us the way she formed Jesus. To say that Jesus is the son of Mary is to join them both in turning the world right-side up.

Amen.

⁵ From Craig Miller, in a sermon discussion thread on the Worship Design Studio website (posted and accessed 12 December 2025).