



MARY'S  
*Voice*

*Advent Reflections  
to Contemplate  
the Coming of Christ*

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Nashville • New York

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## INTRODUCTION

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**I**magine being a young woman in a forgotten corner of an occupied country oppressed by a powerful empire. Imagine being a woman at a time when a woman's voice meant nothing. And now, think for a moment about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In the Christian story, Mary is the one who God chose to be the mother of Jesus.

In the run-up to Christmas, there is a peculiar amount of work to be done that might fall into the category of “physical and emotional labor.” This is the endless, unseen work of caring that generally, if not exclusively, often falls to women. Despite all the advances in opportunity and equality in our society, women appear to carry the brunt of domestic and emotional labor. At Christmastime, it would be all too easy to exhaust ourselves further after the work, turmoil, trauma, and anxiety of the year that has just passed.

Centering a woman's perspective at Christmas is about far more than empathizing with the eye-watering feats of planning that go into pulling off seasonal festivities. Paying heed to a woman's viewpoint is necessary if we are going to truly celebrate Christmas, because the central character of the Christmas story, other than the baby Jesus, is a woman named Mary.

At Christmastime we remember that an ordinary, young,

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poor, oppressed woman was chosen to play a significant and breakthrough role in the redemption of the world. Evil would be crushed and defeated through her seed. Her body was to play a part in showing the world that Jesus really is Emmanuel—*God with us*. Her theological insights and reactions are recorded for us in the New Testament.

By positioning Mary in this way, the New Testament is unlike any document of the era. We can see what kind of person is invited to be a gospel witness, a teacher of profound theology, and an example of simple, humble faith. It is no mistake that a woman gets to be a part of all this, and that her voice, her questions, her fears, her actions, and her obedience matter.

The Christmas story accentuates one woman's perspective. Her fear, her faith, and her wisdom form an astonishing aspect of the story of how God became a person for the love of this world, and how Jesus of Nazareth on that first Christmas Day could be called "*the Son of God*." And in our weary world that is waiting and longing for light, meaning, peace, and love, perhaps we might do as Mary did when she "*treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*."

We first encounter Mary as a young unmarried teenager, but for many of us she remains fixed in our imaginations as a remote "other worldly" figure, with the faint glimmer of a smile talking to an angel or holding a baby. Held up by some as the unattainable ideal of purity or the example of perfect motherhood, Mary is a distant figure for us in our busy lives in this technological age. In our reading and telling of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ, Mary's point of

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view is seldom considered. In the many re-enactments of the nativity story around Christmastime, Mary is usually a mute figure, saying nothing as the story of the journey to Bethlehem, the search for accommodation, and the birth of the child surrounded by animals unfolds. We may be familiar with the star of Bethlehem, the manger as a cradle, the shepherds, the angels, and the visit of the Magi. Portrayals of the nativity abound, but amidst it all Mary is a passive and silent figure. I once played the role of Mary in a school play, and for the entire show I did not utter a word.

Yet Mary is described in Luke's gospel as a woman who exercised choice, questioned things, reflected, responded, spoke up, and demonstrated great faith. Mary had a voice.

I can remember exactly where I was when I was first truly struck by Mary's voice. I had slipped into a pew in one of Britain's most beautiful cathedrals on a Wednesday at dusk for evensong. I was chilled to the bone in the moment of the service when the choir sang the words of Mary's Magnificat recorded for us in Luke's gospel: "*He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.*"

I had spent that day sitting in the public gallery of a court supporting someone who was giving evidence in a criminal trial concerning childhood abuse. Mary's words expressing hope on behalf of the poor, the humble, and the powerless felt especially meaningful that evening in the aftermath of the horrors of trauma recounted in that courtroom. Until this point, Mary had been a somewhat remote figure for me. A woman often depicted wearing blue clothing in paintings, idealized as

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the perfect mother of a cherubic baby. Mary was stuck in my mind in suspended animation in the early stages of her motherhood, holding a baby and remembered each year as a rather distant figure when Christmas rolled around. Yet here was Mary's voice, her actual words recorded in Luke's gospel, prophesying about what Jesus had come to do, identifying Jesus as God, Lord, and the source of justice and mercy in this world. Mary had offered theological insights and shared her unique perspective on the person of Jesus Christ. Her front-row seat on history had somehow passed me by. But I realized in that moment that Mary's voice is worth listening to.

It seems that Luke (the author of the Gospel of Luke) did exactly that; he listened. At the start of his gospel narrative, he shares his method in writing: "*since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account...*" (Luke 1:3). Luke was a doctor—a man of science and learning. He was also a gentile. He had not lived through or experienced firsthand the life and ministry of Jesus. So when he wrote his gospel he needed to go and interview the key eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus, and to investigate the history. He explains to his readers that he adopted this methodology intentionally: "*so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught*" (Luke 1:4). It mattered to Luke that we, his readers, could know for certain that the accounts of Jesus's life are true, so that we could trust and be sure even though, like him, we don't have personal or direct experience of the events he records. And to achieve that he needed to go back to the beginning—and that meant going to listen to Mary.

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Luke's gospel draws on Mary as the primary witness throughout his historical narrative. He is held up by scholars as particularly interesting because he draws so heavily on the experiences of women. Mary is the primary source of his information. And that is why Luke is able to give us such an intimate account of how the birth of Jesus came to be in his gospel. Mary's voice and perspective have been preserved for us. Luke doesn't merely include Mary in the story, he centers her perspective as our viewpoint into the story of how God came to be a human being. Dorothy L. Sayers called the incarnation "the greatest story ever told."<sup>1</sup> The creator enters his own world as a human being, and the author of life appears as a character in his own story. The primary witness to all of this is Mary.

Luke includes details of Mary's personal experience around the conception, pregnancy, and birth of Jesus that could only have come directly from her. She recounts interactions from this period with characters such as the shepherds, Elizabeth, Anna, Simeon, and of course Joseph. To have access to the direct speech and reactions of these key figures from history is astonishing and precious. We will take time to dwell on the meaning and significance of each as we journey through the book.

*Mary's Voice* will also explore the themes that were important to Mary as she pondered and reflected upon who Jesus really is. Mary's theology is deep, and her Christology—her understanding of Christ—matters greatly given her role as

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1 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Dogma Is the Drama," in *Creed or Chaos?* p. 24.

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a firsthand witness to the events and as Jesus's mother. Her reflections upon the suffering of this world and the meaning of Jesus's arrival connect with all who journey through tears, disappointment, lament, struggle, and pain.

Mary also speaks about power—one of the biggest issues of our day—and her words remain as relevant to today as ever. She understands the longings of those who find themselves oppressed and points us to the one who “fills the hungry with good things.” The central woman to the Christian faith has a voice, and she uses it to point us toward the Lord Jesus. Encouraging us to dwell on who he is and what he came into this world to do.

Mary's accounts have tremendous historical significance. The scriptures can give us a truly intimate account of how the birth of Jesus came to be, precisely because Mary's voice and insights have been preserved for us. It is worthwhile to take the time to dwell on the riches of her perspective. This matters at more than a literary or aesthetic level, although Mary's voice contributes to both. Because at the heart of the Christian faith is the claim that God entered his own creation in the person of Jesus Christ—the doctrine of the Incarnation—and the primary witness to the incarnation is Mary.

A woman's voice has been preserved for over two thousand years; this is something precious and profound in and of itself. But Mary shares with us *how* the arc of history has been shaped by the coming of God as a man. Her account is historical and detailed, but it is also laden with meaning and prophetic nuance. Mary's perspective is unique, profound, domestic,

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beautiful, good, and true. The earthiness and the wonder of the incarnation are both captured here.

And so, as Christmas rolls around again and another year passes, we have the opportunity to recapture some wonder as we remember the birth of Christ and to take time to reflect and dwell on the meaning of Jesus's birth. *Mary's Voice* is an invitation to prepare our hearts in a time called Advent, in anticipation of Christmas when we will celebrate and mark the birth of Christ into this world.

Advent means arrival. Traditionally, Christians have taken the days and weeks before Christmas Day to spiritually prepare hearts and minds to capture the theological wonder of the incarnation and to prepare for the second arrival of Jesus—his return. *Mary's Voice* is a journey through Advent driven by the theological insights of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This book begins on December 1 and accompanies the reader throughout Advent with daily spiritual preparation based on a passage of scripture, a reflection, and a visual image. The devotional draws on the voice and insights of one person who is absolutely central to the coming of God into the world, who may be seen but is rarely heard. This person is Mary; her voice, her wisdom, her theological insight, her praise, her reaction to the events—all of these are recorded for us in the gospels. *Mary's Voice* will help us as readers recapture the wonder of God's coming in history in the person of Jesus, through the lens of Mary's viewpoint, with daily theological reflections, poems, collections, and beautiful pictures.

At Advent, we have a unique opportunity to dwell daily

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upon the marvelous truth that God became a human being and entered our world. God was born in history. In all the planning, preparing, partying, and organizing, don't forget to treasure the truth at the heart of Christmas primarily witnessed by a young woman. Jesus is Immanuel—*God with us*. In this world of pain, disappointment, exhaustion, and suffering the promise of Christmas is that a savior was born for us.

And maybe as you ponder all this in your heart, like Mary did, you will be able to experience the one who Isaiah prophesied would be the Prince of Peace. Charles Wesley finished his famous carol with that hope and I for one know I need it:

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!*

*Hail the Sun of Righteousness!*

*Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings!*

*Mild he lays his glory by,*

*Born that man no more may die,*

*Born to raise the sons of earth*

*Born to give them second birth*

Christmas Carol: "Hark! The Herald Angels  
Sing," Charles Wesley



**D**eus. Ad primam  
in adiutorium  
meum intende  
Dne ad adiuua  
du me festina  
**G**loria pa  
tri et filio. **ps.**

**D**eus creator spiritus mentes  
tuorum dulciter imple super  
na gratia que tu creasti peccato  
ra. **M**emento salutis auctor quod non  
quondam corporis exlibata uirgine  
nascendo formam sumptis. **M**aria  
mater gratie mater misericordie tu nos  
ab hoste protege in hora mortis suscipe.  
**G**loria tibi dne qui natus es de uir  
gine cum patre et sco spiritu in semp  
terna secula. Amen. **o.** admirabile  
**D**eus in nomine tuo saluum  
me fac et in uirtute tua iudi

Illustration from *The Book of Hours*,  
Lambeth Palace Library, London.

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The *Book of Hours* is an illustrated manuscript. It is a Flemish book handwritten in Latin for English use, and it was created on Vellum in the 1400s before the invention of paper. It is a devotional book that was used to pray at different points during the day, drawing from the psalms and including hymns and readings.

In this image Mary and Joseph are depicted inside the letter D, which stands for *Deus*—meaning God. They are kneeling before Christ as an infant, with a donkey and an ox drawing our attention to their humanity and earthiness. The simplicity of their context is a connection point for the viewer as the faces of Mary and Joseph are humble and strikingly human. All the faces (human and animal) turn outward from the page, beckoning us in invitation to join them in worship of Christ. The detail of the extended, decorative, floral frame of wildflowers, strawberries, and peonies echoes the praise of all creation. This image is one of hundreds as each page of the book has been intricately drawn.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**DR. AMY ORR-EWING** is an international author, speaker, and theologian who addresses the deep questions of our day with meaningful answers found in the Christian faith. Amy is the author of multiple books including *Where Is God in All the Suffering?* and the best-selling *Why Trust the Bible?* Over the last twenty years, Amy has given talks on university campuses

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