

The Hand That Rocks The Cradle

1. Warm-up question: Tell about a time when you really embarrassed or aggravated your mother.

2. The setting for this week's Scripture passage is when Mary was pregnant with Jesus. Since she was (in the eyes of the skeptics around her) pregnant out of wedlock, she left her home village of Nazareth to spend some time with her Aunt Elizabeth away from the judgment of others. Elizabeth was also pregnant with a child who would eventually be known as John the Baptist. Our reading describes their first few moments together when Mary arrives, as Mary chants a song of praise she wrote. Her song gives us a penetrating glimpse into her core beliefs about life and God. Read Luke 1:39-56, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Verse 45 tells us that Mary "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." In other words, she believed that God had a grand plan that was being fulfilled in her time – and that she and her son were part of that plan. Jesus came to believe the same thing. When he announced his public ministry, Jesus declared that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me" to serve a special purpose. Luke 4:18. Do you believe God has a special plan for your life? If so, what's your best guess as to what that plan is?
 - b. In verse 46, Mary chants that "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." Here we see another of Mary's core beliefs, *i.e.*, that God uses simple, unassuming people to do great things. Jesus embraced that same core belief. When it was time to call his disciples, Jesus passed over the well-bred, well-heeled, and well-educated in favor of poor fishermen, despised tax collectors, and disaffected Zealot rebels. Why do you think God so often chooses to work through lowly people?
 - c. In verse 51, Mary chants that "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and has brought down the powerful from their thrones . . . and lifted up the lowly." Here we see Mary's core belief that God cares passionately about the plight of despised people and fights against those who oppress them. Jesus embraced that same core belief. He advocated for women (even calling female disciples at a time that was unheard of) and advocated for the Samaritans (a despised racial minority). What are the implications of this for how churches should function in our world today? Are churches living up to that call?
 - d. In verse 53, Mary chants that "God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Here we see Mary's core belief that God fills the hungry while sending the rich away empty. Jesus embraced the same core belief. Jesus himself said, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." Luke 6:21. What do you think this means? What does it mean to say God fills the hungry with good things? What does it mean to say God sends the rich away empty?

3. Clearly, Mary's core beliefs profoundly shaped her son, so much so you could say that Jesus became the spitting image of his mother. The values he championed were precisely the values Mary carried in her heart. To borrow a phrase from Elizabeth Stone, Jesus was Mary's heart walking around outside her body. As such, the story of Mary is a powerful reminder of the power of Moms – and Dads, and Grandmas and Grandpas – to shape their children, for better or worse. Let's look first at shaping for the better.
 - a. What's one of the highest positive values you learned from your Mom or someone who was like a Mom to you? Do you feel that you're living that value?
 - b. Oswald Guinness tells how, when he was young, his parents each gave him a stone with their life motto carved on it. He carried the stones in his pockets for years, deeply internalizing their high values. Imagine yourself making a similar stone for a child, grandchild, or some other special child in your life. What would you paint on your stone? What's the value, belief, or message you would want that child to embrace, internalize, and live?
4. Parents and grandparents can also shape us in negative ways. No parent is ever perfect. Even Mary herself had her moments. Mark chapter 3 tells us of a time when Mary had her doubts about what Jesus was doing in his ministry and tried to "restrain" him. If Mary couldn't always get it right, neither will any of us.
 - a. What's one of the worst values you saw in your Mom or Dad, and how has that affected you? Is there something you learned from them that you now need to consciously unlearn because it's holding you back? Do you feel like you're making progress in unlearning that negative value?
 - b. Why are the negative values our parents imprint on us so hard to overcome?
5. It's not just parents who've been entrusted with the power to profoundly shape their children. God has entrusted all of us – mothers, fathers, bosses, aunts, uncles, teachers, friends, coworkers – with the profound power to shape the people around us. Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Each of us is constantly carving on the people around us. We can all be like Mary.
 - a. Tell us about a time in your past when you were a meaningful influence in someone's life without even realizing it.
 - b. Name someone in your life right now that you have the power to influence. Tell us about a way you're being a positive influence on them?
 - c. As noted above, none of us is perfect. So that means we also often negatively influence on others. Tell us about a way you may be negatively influencing the person you mentioned in 5.a. What might you need to change or correct to minimize your negative influence?

Luke 1:39-56

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.