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Mary: Our Role Model?

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Annie Sears

As a young girl growing up in the church, I was always encouraged to base my faith on Mary's. After all, she's the mother of Jesus. She's the epitome of being used to bring the Kingdom to fruition – quite literally. She's the manifestation of submissive faith, of perfect trust, of putting God's will above one's own. When the angel approached her with God's plan, this "favored one" (Luke 1:28) humbly responded, "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Because of her virtue, Mary is held high in all church traditions, especially Catholicism. In so many churches, she's promoted as a role model for all Christian girls.

But if I casually came home one evening and told my parents that I was pregnant, I don't think they'd be too pleased. And if I told them not to worry because the baby didn't belong to my fiancé, I think they'd worry even more. And I don't think that informing them of my intact virginity – explaining that the Holy Spirit miraculously conceived the baby – would mend the newly torn rift in our relationship.

So, Mary, my role model? Right?

Still, even if I'm not called to mimic Mary in her specific circumstances, I think we're all – male and female – called to mimic Mary in the process of pregnancy.

We exist in the time between Jesus' first and second coming, the era commonly termed "the now, but not yet." God's process of redemption has begun. Jesus initiated it, and the Holy Spirit is continuing it in the meantime, but we haven't experienced restoration in full. It's as if this planet is a giant, inhabited womb preparing to give birth to the child that is a perfect creation.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. – Romans 8:22-23

This child that is the new creation exists, and it's here with its mother at all times. She can't escape it. We have brief, tangible experiences when the baby kicks, when we're allowed peeks into the anticipated Heaven-on-Earth – perhaps through a good conversation with a friend, or an intimate prayer session, or merely a good night's sleep. But Heaven-on-Earth is only kind of here. That metaphorical child will be more here when it can be held. This is the tension of the now-not-yet that characterizes the Christian experience, and that tension must have been heightened for Mary as she carried Jesus.

Even when this metaphorical baby is partially hidden, preparations are taking place for its complete arrival. In modern terms, nursery walls are being painted, baby showers are being thrown, and the mother is eating well to nourish both herself and the extension of herself so intimately intertwined with her identity. In Christmas-story terms, Mary began to tie the sash around her waist a little looser. Perhaps Joseph the carpenter – after recovering from the initial shock of his angel encounter and prophetic dream – began his preparation cycle with carving a crib for baby Jesus.

As part of *her* preparation, Mary went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth, who was also miraculously pregnant with her first child. Did Mary go because she felt called to spend time with Elizabeth, or did Mary go to avoid the shame of the baby bump her neighbors were sure to gossip about? The Bible doesn't say. But regardless of Mary's motives, God used these women's time together for His good. In spending most of her pregnancy with Elizabeth, Mary found solace in and offered support to another woman undergoing similar circumstances. Both were pregnant for the first time, both were pregnant by unusual means, and both must have had all sorts of complications to share with one

another. God called them both to be part of a miracle, but they didn't have to live into this calling alone.

Similarly, modern-day Christians are currently preparing for Jesus' second coming. But rather than filling a baby registry, we're intentionally ministering to our friends. We're praying for our nation. We're creating worship opportunities. We're fighting for those who don't have a voice, and we're allowing others to be our voice when we ourselves are hurting. We're striving to know Christ more and to be more like Him. Further – also similarly to Mary – we are not called to do so alone. We are the church: serving together, growing together, and learning from each other as we all prepare for the fully restored life to come. Do we do so perfectly? Of course not. That's why we have each other to offer encouragement and accountability.

So this metaphorical baby hasn't arrived, but in preparation for the birth, the baby is always on the hearts and minds of mom and dad. They're waiting, but they're nervous. They're certain, but they're doubtful. They're expectant, but they're fearful. After all, they're human. This baby was conceived and created in the greatest act of love known to its parents. In other words, this child's arrival will be love spurring more love, and it's representative of what Christians are constantly striving for. Full redemption will be the greatest act that God could use to communicate His love for us. Just as Jesus' atoning and saving death was a powerful manifestation of God's love for His people, Jesus' second coming will give tangible evidence of the love that has always been present through all the waiting.

Mary and Joseph weren't expecting this manifestation of love for only a mere nine months, though. Rather, their expectancy stretched over generations. It stretched over the silence between the Old and New Testament. It stretched from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Joseph, from Joseph to Moses to David to Elijah to Isaiah – on and on throughout history. Jesus' gestation period, so to speak, was incredibly lengthy. That's why Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy, emphasizing all the waiting that has happened as God's people prepare for the birth of the Child conceived in the greatest act of love.

And as time moves closer and closer to the end of this pregnancy, the child continues to grow and grow. That's where the pain that we experience on this earth comes to play. Growing pains hurt, even though they indicate a movement towards greater fullness, and that growth is always working towards the culmination. That culmination, that birth, will hurt worst of all, but the suffering will be more than worth it once the birth is complete because the love will have come in full. The pain's purpose will be revealed, and the pain itself will seem insignificant.

So even if we're not called to give birth to the Messiah, we are called to mimic Mary's process. We're called to waiting, to certainty of the good to come, to expectancy, and to preparation for the now-not-yet's full arrival. We're called to the community found in our shared waiting and to understanding pain as a result of growth. We're called to marvel at God's love manifested in Jesus first coming, and we're called to eagerly anticipate God's love to be manifest in Jesus second coming.

And ultimately, we're called to "treasure up all these things, pondering them in [our] heart[s]" and allowing them to affect the way we live and serve, just as Mary did (Luke 2:19).