

There couldn't be 4 more different stories about Jesus' conception and birth than the ones in the 4 gospels.

The only reason we think there's one consistent birth narrative is because we tend to think all the bits are in all the gospel stories. But that's not true.

Mark's gospel, the earliest Gospel written, has no birth narrative. Mark's gospel begins when Jesus is about 30. It's like Jesus sprang onto the scene fully grown. Ready to preach. No mention of a unique birth experience. John's gospel has no birth narrative either.

So we have Matthew and Luke—and they take opposite directions from each other.

Matthew is all about the men. It starts with a genealogy of men, then merely says, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

Then Matthew goes on to talk about how Joseph felt about the whole thing, angels coming to him in dreams, what a wonderful guy he was to remain engaged to Mary after the embarrassment of finding out she was with child. And – oh yeah—in this Gospel they already live in Bethlehem. In a house.

Then we have the bit about the magi coming to Herod, and then finding Joseph and Mary at their house and they gave the baby gifts. Then there was the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath and their eventual immigration to Nazareth when Jesus was a boy.

Poor Mary. She's kind of an afterthought in this gospel.

But this is Mary Sunday. So we go to the only gospel that really mentions Mary: Luke's gospel.

The Gospel begins with a rather long story about Zechariah and Elizabeth. It's an exciting tale of a woman unable to have a child. Her husband is punished for not believing the Angel Gabriel when he tells him that his wife is finally pregnant. For his disbelief he is made mute--unable to speak. Elizabeth, meanwhile, is delighting in her pregnancy, and her new found

status in the town. And she doesn't seem to be *unhappy* that her husband can't speak....

Then the Angel Gabriel is sent to Mary. He tells her God is with her. Mary is somewhat perplexed. One assumes she isn't used to heavenly messengers dropping by her house. She thinks it strange that she could be an impending mother when she is not yet married. But after talking with Gabriel, she gracefully acquiesces.

She visits Elizabeth. They see the marvel of the moment. They laugh and cry and thank God that though Mary is without a husband and Elizabeth's husband can't talk—things are amazing.

Mary stays with Elizabeth for a few months then goes back home to Nazareth.

Elizabeth has her baby and names him John (Yes—THAT John) and Zechariah gets his voice back. And proceeds to sing a very long song in his joy.

So the reason I'm pointing all this out is because in both Matthew and Luke, Mary seems to be a relatively minor character. There is much more narrative space given to Joseph in Matthews version --and to Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke's version.

What's really interesting is that despite this, Mary has become a central part of many Christian's faith throughout the ages, all the way through to today.

Now don't get me wrong--it's wonderful to see the joy of an older woman being told she is finally going to be a mother. It's kind of exciting to see a man struck voiceless because of disbelief. It's interesting to see the internal struggles of a man who is finding that his life from now on will revolve—not around himself, but around the child his wife is carrying. And of course kings are cool and shepherds and lambs and angels—well, cuddly things and glowing beings always make good stories.

But even with all of this—excitement--it's Mary who catches our attention.

None of Gospel writers write much about what she said, except here in Luke, but what he *does* record about Mary is memorable.

Look at the words we call the Magnificat—which means literally “magnifies”. As in makes expansive—or makes larger.

Mary’s soul becomes more expansive—larger when in the presence of God’s messenger.

The gloriousness of God bursts from her lips and she barely spares one line for herself.

This is why we remember Mary. Yes, she is theotokos—God bearer, but she speaks of all God’s children, all the children beloved of God.

She knows that God loves everyone- not just the powerful, those whose bellies are full, those who have always had enough, but God also loves those who have been forgotten by those who run the world. Who benefit from the misfortunes of others.

While Mary bears the child of God, she brings the children of the world to God with her prayer and her praise.

She speaks for people who are still vilified today: the outcast, those who are marginalized, the poor, the unpowerful people.

You couldn’t ask for a better woman to be the mother to the Christ child.

I’m so glad that Luke decided to include her in the narrative. He has made her the voice of the voiceless. And once again—the least expected person: a young, often overlooked woman takes on the role that will become the turning point of the Christmas story. And as the world pivots on the person of Mary-- her expansive love magnifies our souls.

Amen.