



ADVENT SEASON 2022

*A new time is upon us.
A great hope is before us.
The Light has embraced us.*



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EDITOR: SHARON DEVO
CONTENT WRITTEN BY: TAMMY WINN
DESIGN & LAYOUT BY CHRISTINE CIANCIOSI
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FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MIRIAM OF NAZARETH

By: Tammy Winn

Introduction:

Miriam (*the Hebrew version of the name Mary*), the mother of Jesus, comes to mind every Advent season as the one who cooperated with God to change the world. She is the most celebrated female figure in the Christian tradition and well known throughout the world beyond this one religion (*Johnson, 2003, p. 3*).

Though most theologians did not mention Miriam in the first 300 years after Jesus' life on earth, the study of Scripture, archaeological research, and other sources help reveal to us who this woman was.

Over time a theology has developed around Miriam that upholds her, in some circles, to be almost a Goddess. Teachings about her — having been conceived without sin, or being physically a virgin for life, or having been bodily assumed into heaven upon her death — are highlighted and set her apart from everyday people. While this reverence for her can represent a lovely devotion, it can also make the very real story of her historical life on earth less accessible to us.

Rather than only exalt her as exceptional, let us also embrace Miriam as an example of one who makes tangible for all of us the capacity to live full of grace (*p. 23*). In this reflection series we will seek to explore the historical Miriam and, in that context, consider the relationships she held. By exploring Miriam's relationships, perhaps we'll gain awareness about our formative associations and find inspiration to contemplate where we too are being invited into collaboration with God.

The main source for this reflections series was the book
Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints
by Elizabeth A. Johnson



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO HERSELF



Miriam was a human being, a fascinating woman, on a spiritual journey. She is an ancestor of ours in faith, who, like all of us, lived between challenge and grace. To understand some aspects of Miriam's relationship to herself, we can look at the title bestowed on her as Virgin Mary.

The original definition of the term virgin did not mean one who has never had sex (*Johnson, 2003, p. 31*). Instead, as revealed in mythology, a virgin was someone with a quality of spiritual purity. The archetypal view of virginity denotes that a virgin was a person aware of their intrinsic value with a strong sense of autonomy. A virgin did not need to be validated by marriage or children, rather she relied on her own inner authority. By the fact that Miriam was given the title of virgin, we can imagine she knew her worth, paying little attention to identity or status.

Miriam's relationship to herself is further revealed in the annunciation, wherein she receives an angelic line of communication with God. The angel Gabriel shares with her the plan and Miriam listens. We can envision her to be mentally tough and confident, someone who, in the words of Johnson paraphrasing Pope Paul VI, "... had the wits to question back when the angel addressed her..." (*p. 133*). Then Miriam, without seeking external permission to respond, stands in her own dignity and courage to assert her agreement. She uses her voice and trusts her experience.

Through Miriam's self-command as revealed in Scripture, and the many titles of honor given to her throughout centuries, we gather that this was a woman who had a well built relationship to herself. We see in her story how she accepts tremendous uncertainty with a firm understanding of who she is. Healthy self-love is required for such a path.

POINT OF REFLECTION:

When considering Miriam's relationship to herself, to which of these attributes can I relate?

Are there any I seek to further develop?

What is one way I can improve my relationship to self?



SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MIRIAM OF NAZARETH

By: Tammy Winn

Miriam's Relationship to the Divine

Women are not mentioned a lot in Scripture in comparison to men. Yet Miriam plays a key role in the New Testament, and it is from that collection of stories we can glean something about her relationship to the Divine (*Peters, n.d.*). We know that Miriam was a first century Jewish woman. As a devout Jew, she was part of the covenant between the people and the God of Israel (*Johnson, 2003, p. 163*). At the heart of Judaism is the Shema, the fundamental teaching of Mosaic Law, which Miriam would have made as a confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength." (*New American Bible, Revised Edition, 2011, Deut. 6:4-5*).

Yahweh is the God of Miriam's ancestors, revelatory and personal, a God who acts in history to encourage the redemption of his people (*Johnson, 2003, p. 163*). Miriam's relationship with the Divine must have given her courage to endure a scandalous pregnancy that legally subjected her to severe punishment (*p. 225*). Her confidence in God allows her not to merely endure the path of an unwed mother, amidst horrible social and political consequences, but to actively trust that Yahweh stood with her, the outcast. Holding to her faith, Miriam answered her vocation of motherhood by simply doing the next right thing. As Johnson puts it, because of Miriam's choices "...henceforth God will be at home in the flesh of the world in a new way." (*p. 257*).

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SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE DIVINE



Like many organized religions, Judaism for Miriam was a mixture of beliefs and practices (*p. 165*). Theologians have deduced that she and Joseph were observant Jews, following the laws and rituals of the time including daily prayer, attending synagogue, taking sabbath rest, and making pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem. It is in their Jewish home that they raised Jesus who, though he challenged some of its teachings, never renounced the religion. The faith of Miriam, Joseph, and Jesus is the ground upon which this Holy Family embraced the messianic adventure unfolding in their lives (*p. 26*). The story of an unwed mother could have gone quite differently, especially in that time period. Yet God blessed the situation, not just for Miriam but forevermore.

It's worth noting that this second week of Advent also holds the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This

feast day, celebrated on December 8th, honors Miriam as the Mother of God and references the teaching that she was conceived in her mother's womb without sin. Franciscan Theologian Duns Scotus suggested that Christ's saving power is so perfect that sin never even entered her, demonstrating a gift given to Miriam and a sign of hope for us all (*Shea, 2012*). Or, said another way by Elizabeth Johnson (*2003*), "The opposite of sin is grace, and the Immaculate Conception means that Mary was uniquely blessed at the outset with the gift of grace, God's own self-communication." (*p. 108*).

There is a quality of mystery that accompanies each person's relationship to the Divine, and Miriam is no different. Yet we get a glimpse of what we cannot know about Miriam by what we do know. She was dedicated to something larger than herself, with conviction and discipline, yielding to grace as a way of life.

POINT OF REFLECTION:

As I get a sense of Miriam's relationship to the Divine, are there qualities of faith we hold in common?

What aspects of my spiritual life do I want to cultivate?

What is one way I can improve my relationship to the Divine?



SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE DIVINE

For further reflection, you can listen to Tammy Winn's original song "Shema," at: <https://tammywinn.com/track/2126654/shema>
Following are the lyrics.

SHEMA

Keep these words written on your heart
Share them both near and far
Bind these truths all around your home
The Lord our God is the Lord alone

Remember God with all your might
Love with your whole heart and soul
Bear in mind this fact should you roam
The Lord our God is the Lord alone

The law of the Lord will last
A privilege for us to hold up high
Break off the shackles from the past
And carry on in the light

Please the Lord with compassionate strides
Pray for the strength to go on
Leave behind your heavy stones
The Lord our God is the Lord alone

Bind these truths all around your home
The Lord our God is the Lord alone
Bear in mind this fact should you roam
The Lord our God is the Lord alone
All of this I know you know
The Lord our God is the Lord alone

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References for this reflection:

- Peters, M. (n.d.). *Jewish Identity of Mary*. University of Dayton. <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/j/jewish-identity-of-mary.php>
- Johnson, E. (2003). *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.
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- Shea, M. (2012). *The Immaculate Conception: Enter the Subtle Doctor: Duns Scotus*. National Catholic Register. <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/the-immaculate-conception-enter-the-subtle-doctor-duns-scotus>



THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MIRIAM OF NAZARETH

By: Tammy Winn

Miriam's Relationship to Family

Tradition holds that Miriam's parents were Anne and Joachim. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2020), an ancient story shares that they initially grieved over not having children. Despite being old, they prayed and pleaded with God. Then angels appeared to both Anne and Joachim separately, promising them not only a child but one who would be known worldwide. Together they rejoiced and trusted God's promise. Then Miriam was born. Though not noted in the biblical canon, through this legendary account we can imagine Miriam was cherished by her family. Her character, as displayed in Scripture, also makes it likely that she had been given a solid foundation in her youth.

In Miriam's time, marriages were typically arranged. The requirement by Roman law was that the girl be at least twelve years old and the boy be at least fourteen (*Johnson, p. 190*). Historians believe Miriam was about this age when her marriage to Joseph began. While we don't know what age Joseph was at that time, we can surmise that he was a faithful Jew who earned a living as a craftsman of wood and stone, part of the artisan-peasant class. The marriage process, according to Jewish custom, had two phases. First there was a betrothal wherein the two parties would formally agree to marriage and the bride price would be paid. At this point, the union was legally established, though the couple would not live together for about another year. It is here that Miriam becomes pregnant and Joseph is faced with the decision to divorce her or complete the marriage process.

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THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO FAMILY



Encouraged by an angel in a dream, Joseph ultimately decides not to abandon Miriam. Elizabeth Johnson writes, “The critical factor, according to the gospels, lay in the way he offered the protection of legal paternity to her firstborn son whom she conceived in what appeared to be dubious circumstances.” (p. 193)

Centered on trust in God’s messengers, they complete the marriage process wherein Miriam would be ceremoniously moved into Joseph’s home to live and work amidst his extended family. Joseph accepts the baby in Miriam’s womb as his own, to provide for and raise. He protects this child from the start by fleeing with Miriam and Jesus to Egypt to escape the threat of King Herod. Surely what started as an arranged marriage in ancient Palestine is quite different than how we perceive marriage today, but we can presume that Miriam’s relationship with Joseph held purposefulness, compassion, and commitment.

The Gospel reading from Monday of this week reveals that Miriam also enjoyed a relationship with her relative Elizabeth. Miriam learns from the angel Gabriel that she

is not alone in experiencing an unexpected pregnancy but that Elizabeth, who is quite old, is six months pregnant. The child in her womb will become known as John the Baptist.

Miriam travels to visit Elizabeth and stays for about three months. “Being singled out as mothers of redemption made Elizabeth and Mary need each other for this and much more... Each needed to talk with another who knew what it meant to grapple with God’s intentions. Their mutual encouragement enabled them to go forward with more confidence and joy despite the struggle that still faced them.” (p. 260). Through this relationship we can infer that Miriam knew the value of women helping women and that she likely had the wisdom to seek out a mentor she could trust to understand.

Living in Nazareth as wife and mother, Miriam’s household was likely a full one. The Gospels refer to Jesus’ brothers and sisters, and while scholars debate three positions on the matter – children born to Miriam and Joseph after the birth of Jesus, children of Joseph’s



THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO FAMILY

by a previous marriage, or cousins of Jesus — we can conclude that Miriam had a role of caretaking for more than just Jesus (*pp. 195-197*).

Typical dwelling spaces for a family of her social and economic status in Galilee would have been small, perhaps a room or two. (*p. 142*) This space was likely grouped with several other families, namely Joseph's relatives or those connected to them. Each in their own quarters, built in a compound around a courtyard, these multigenerational groups could labor together, survive hardships, and celebrate life.

Miriam's relationship to family was likely shaped by many connections. A grounded upbringing, an ultimately successful arranged marriage, closeness with women in her family like Elizabeth, parenting Jesus and nurturing other children, and the associations with extended family and in-laws all played a part. No doubt her life was meaningfully intertwined with many.

For further reflection, you can sit with the words of the most popular Marian prayer.

"The Hail Mary," known in Latin as the "Ave Maria," was built over time, starting with the words of Scripture attributed to Angel Gabriel (*Luke 1:28*) and Elizabeth (*Luke 1:42*). The latter part of the prayer was added by the Church. The version we know and use today was finalized in the sixteenth century (*Buono, n.d.*).

The Hail Mary

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you;
blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

References for this reflection:

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2020) *Novena Saints Anne and Joachim*. Retrieved from <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Sts%20Anne%20and%20Joachim%20Novena.pdf>
- Johnson, E. (2003). *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Buono, A. (n.d.) *History of the Hail Mary*. University of Dayton. <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/h/hail-mary-prayer-history.php>

POINT OF REFLECTION:

*Realizing the many features of Miriam's relationship to family, are there some I can connect with over 2000 years later?
Are there any I hope to foster in my life now, either with biological family or "chosen" family?
What is one way I can improve my relationship to family?*



FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MIRIAM OF NAZARETH

By: Tammy Winn

Miriam's Relationship to Society

Despite the graces given to her by God, Miriam did not have an easy life. In the small village of Nazareth, an agricultural community, poverty was a fact of life (*Johnson, p. 143*). This included illness, shortened life-spans, and the tragedy of infant mortality. Hers was a peasant community, where she lived at a subsistence level. This meant Miriam and her extended family likely met their basic needs by various domestic duties, including growing food to eat and making clothes to wear from sheep's wool they spun themselves. Whatever was needed for living was usually grown and built by their own hands. Miriam's relationship to society was one of communal hard work and demanding physical labor.

Miriam's world was also a multilingual one wherein she could encounter any of four languages (*p. 141*). Her local language in Nazareth and throughout Galilee was Aramaic. In the synagogue Miriam would have heard Hebrew. The common language among the educated and those doing business was Greek. Finally, Latin was used by the Romans who occupied the Jewish homeland. Managing to interact with strangers amidst various languages had to be challenging, yet we know Miriam did not shrink back. She traveled out of desire and necessity, to visit her cousin Elizabeth, to Bethlehem for the required census, to Egypt for safety, to Jerusalem for Passover pilgrimages, and so forth. She also followed her son's ministry, supporting some of his public lectures with her presence and encouraging him to take the next step in his vocation during the wedding at Cana. Miriam had a knowingness about her son's gifts and believed in what he could offer the world around them.

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FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIETY



In addition to the laborious daily life and navigating the public amidst various languages, the political oppression Miriam lived within was quite unsettling. Roman rule was evident. According to Elizabeth Johnson, “Their governing policy kept the occupied populations pacified, working, and paying, while allowing enough freedom for the exercise of their traditional customs so as to prevent open revolt.” (p. 151). However, she goes on to say, if people were not kept under control, there would be a “...military response including wholesale burning, slaughtering, and enslaving, carried out with a level of violence calculated to terrorize the surviving populace into submission.” (p. 151).

Miriam was surely aware of such evil in their midst, and endured it to the very personal and agonizing point of seeing her son murdered before her eyes. Yet even still, she remained in the movement he began, going with the apostles to the upper room where they were embraced and comforted by the Holy Spirit.

When we learn about Miriam’s relationship to society we find that she had a challenging experience at best and an excruciating one at worst. Her experience with the world around her was difficult. Yet Johnson paraphrases the apostolic letter *Marialis Cultus* to point out that Miriam was “...one who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile. In the midst of these troubles she consistently gave active and responsible consent to the call of God, made courageous choices, and worked to strengthen the faith of others.” (p. 133).

POINT OF REFLECTION:

In light of her historical context, are there facets of Miriam’s relationship to society which are relevant to me today?
Could there be some areas in which I long to evolve?
What is one way I can improve my relationship to society?



FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT:

MIRIAM'S RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIETY

For further reflection, meditate on the Magnificat in light of Miriam's relationship to society.

The Magnificat is read this year on the Thursday of the Fourth Week of Advent, from Luke 1:46-56. "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn." (*Bonhoeffer, 1993, as cited in Johnson, 2003, p. 267*). Shortly after learning she will be the mother of Jesus, Miriam offers this testimony of faith, demonstrating her solidarity with the people of God (*p. 267*). Johnson points out that this is "...the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament, this is the most any woman gets to say." (*p. 263*). Also, "By placing the Magnificat on the lips of Mary, Luke depicts her as the spokeswoman for God's redemptive justice, which will be such a part of the gospel. She proclaims the good news by anticipation, and she does so as a Jewish woman whose consciousness is deeply rooted in the heritage and wisdom of the strong women of Israel. Knowledgeable about the liberating traditions of her own people and trumpeting them with 'tough authority,' this friend of God stands as a prophet of the coming age." (*p. 267*).

And Miriam sang:

"My soul proclaims your greatness, O my God,
and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.
For your regard has blessed me, poor, and a serving
woman.

From this day all generations will call me blessed,
for you, who are mighty, have done great things for me;
and holy is your Name.
Your mercy is on those who fear you, from generation to
generation.

You have shown strength with your arm.
You have scattered the proud in their hearts' conceit.
You have put down the mighty from their thrones,
and have lifted up the lowly.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
and have sent the rich away empty.
You have helped your servant Israel,
remembering your mercy,
as you promised to Abraham and Sarah,
mercy to their children forever."

(Carmelites of Indianapolis, 1997, as cited in Johnson, 2003, p 325)

Reference for this reflection:

· Johnson, E. (2003). *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.



SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF MIRIAM OF NAZARETH

By: Tammy Winn

Christ is born! Miriam as Theotokos, God-bearer

Amidst the joy of a precious baby's birth, of one who would become known throughout the world for millennia as the Christ, we remember that Miriam was the biological mother of this boy Jesus. She had the very real experience of pregnancy, from excitement to discomfort. She had the very real experience of labor and delivery, with all its pain and relief. There's no easy way around birth, especially at that time in history. To this day, birthing a child is one of the most vulnerable things a woman can do, and Miriam did so in one of the most exposed settings imaginable.

Miriam is called the Theotokos, which is a Greek word meaning God-bearer. Johnson (2003) writes, "God and a woman together bring forth the Christ." (p.14). Isn't it wonderful to realize God's passageway to us, for bringing forth the life of Jesus, was through this incredible and very human woman, Miriam. No doubt she raised her child as mother's do – nurturing with consistency, fiercely protecting, teaching to empower, and loving without end. Surely Jesus held the imprint of Miriam's love in his being.

When we consider the fullness of Miriam's life on earth in its historical context, and recognize her humanity in the various relationships she held, her life becomes an invitation. We realize we too are called in our own ways to the same one-in-being-ness with God as she was. Through this lens we can recognize her as the wonderful "soul sister" of ours that she is. "Her historical life having ended, she died and passed into the unimaginable, life-giving embrace of the living God. Now she joins the company of loving, faithful people who encourage those still running the race." (p. 313)

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SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

CHRIST IS BORN! MIRIAM AS THEOTOKOS, GOD-BEARER



As we reflect on Miriam's life and relationships we might find that God invites us to also be passageways for the Sacred to enter the world. Give some thought to the axiom "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born." (p. 34) Perhaps God wants to be born through each of us in a new way this Christmas!

For further contemplation on Relationships Through the Lens of Miriam of Nazareth, ask Miriam to pray with you during the Christmas Season.

You may hear Catholics say they "pray" to Miriam, or Mary, but that's not quite an accurate use of the word. We really only pray to, as in worship, God.

Yet we can communicate soul to soul with Miriam or anyone else, whether on earth or in heaven, through our connection in the communion of saints. Johnson explains that "... the communion of saints stands for a relationship among all holy people of all ages, including the whole company of heaven...and... in a fascinating way, for generations as yet unborn... The whole church through time shares in a communion of hope in the Spirit." (p. 102). We can ask these souls to pray for us, and to join us, when we address God. So, just as you might say to a friend, "please pray for me," so too we can ask this of Miriam.

REFLECTION QUESTION:

Where might you be called to birth more Love into the world?



SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

CHRIST IS BORN! MIRIAM AS THEOTOKOS, GOD-BEARER

Praying with Miriam

God of us all, thank you for the life of Miriam of Nazareth, who walked the earth over 2000 years ago. Thank you for blessing the world with Miriam's son, Jesus, who grew in her womb, and whose life as an infant, child, and adolescent was shaped by her love.

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that like you we can experience a profound relationship between our humanity and the Creator of the Universe — loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that like you we may maintain a quality of spiritual purity, trusting our inner autonomy in relationship with the Divine...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that like you we may see holiness alive in us and around us, regardless of gender, class, religion, or the era in which we were born...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that like you we can testify, with grounded liberation, to the everyday good news for which we are grateful and hopeful...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that we too may cooperate with grace in welcoming that which is ours to do, with a courage that outweighs any fear...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that we may embrace the tangible and embodied parts of our story with serenity...

Miriam, our sister in faith, please pray with us to God...

...that we may remember our place in the communion of saints, that we too are invited to collaborate with you in bringing God's love to the world...

Eternal God, thank you for the ways in which one soul can inspire another. Thank you for hearing all prayers between heaven and earth. Please hold them in the heart of your loving energy that is the source of everything. Amen.

Johnson, E. (2003). *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.

REFLECTIONS



ADVENT SEASON 2022

*How can I awaken
or keep my heart awake
this Advent?*



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