

What Child Is This? – Mary Luke 1:26-35

The opening lines to William Chatterton Dix's famous Christmas carol ask a poignant question. "What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?"

Dix goes on to answer this question in part during the last line of the repeated chorus. This child is "the babe, the son of Mary." Luke's gospel tells how Mary's son would be conceived and that his name would be Jesus. Mary learns of this news in a unique and unforgettable way as recorded in our Gospel: "And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

Luke clearly states the son of Mary was to be named Jesus. Once she gave birth to her son, this is the name he was given just as the angel of the Lord had foretold. As with any child, attributes and characteristics of both a child's mother and father can be recognized and on display. The angel told the virgin Mary in the passage above, what was conceived in her was not from man, but rather, from the Holy Spirit of God. John's gospel says, "God is spirit..." (John 4:24) And Hebrews 1:3 states the following about who this child is that was born in the manger in Bethlehem. "He [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." Hebrews 1:3

Thus, the child referenced in the Christmas carol is God in the flesh that embodies the exact representation of God the Father who conceived Jesus in the womb of Mary by way of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Jesus is fully God. However, Jesus also is fully human because as both the Scriptures and the Christmas carol state, he is "the son of Mary." The Apostle Paul speaks to this phenomenon and unique characteristic of Jesus, son of God and son of Mary, in Philippians 2.

"...though he [Jesus] was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself..."

Thus, while there certainly are reflections and attributes in Jesus' life that display God the Father, likewise, there are reflections from Mary's life that are seen in her son's being that help answer the question: What child is this?

A son having attributes and characteristics of his mother does not make him any less male. Rather, it simply completes the design of who God created this son to be that includes imprints or reflections of his mother as one of her son's parents.

We see in the Gospel accounts the way Jesus deals with people, especially children, with compassion, patience, and tenderness. Over and over again Jesus takes the time to value children and people in the margins of life by giving them dignity and reaching out to embrace and bless them with appropriate, meaningful touch. Mary, described by the angel of the Lord as one who has found favor with God, must have displayed similar compassion, patience, and tenderness in her own life as a woman and mother. This child mentioned in the carol is the one who lay sleeping on Mary's lap as a babe, but one day would grow to exhibit care and compassion to others just as his mother displayed to him.

Additionally, both Mary and Jesus display strong lives that are willing to receive a mission that includes great faith, hope, and trust in their Heavenly Father. When Mary received the mission from the angel of the Lord to conceive and carry the Son of God in her womb, her response in Luke 1:38 was: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her." Luke 1:38

When Jesus grew to adulthood and was in the Garden of Gethsemane praying about the mission he had been given to go to the cross to die for the sins of all humanity, he, like his mother, prayed a prayer of humble submission to his Heavenly Father. Again, Luke's gospel records the prayerful and submissive interaction.

"And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.' And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." Luke 22:41-44

It's interesting to observe that while both Mary and Jesus were interacting in prayerful postures concerning the call and purpose of their lives that were sent from Heaven, both encountered angels in these recorded moments. The angel departed from Mary in her scene while an angel arrived to minister to Jesus in his.

A continued comparison reveals both Mary and Jesus lived lives of great consequence that included deep pain. The scene above described a glimpse into the difficulty Jesus endured in those moments before his arrest that would lead to the cross. A brief scene after the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel shows a prophetic word for Mary that likewise, included pain and sorrow.

"And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'" Luke 2:33-35

This prophecy concerning ramifications surrounding her child also is echoed in the lyrics of the Christmas carol we are examining. Notice these lines from the second stanza. "Nails, spears shall pierce him through, the cross he bore for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary."

These lyrics speak to the reason Jesus was in such agony emotionally, mentally, spiritually and soon would be physically when praying in the Garden about the mission he was called to complete. The allusion in the time of dedication in the Temple from Simeon refers to this heart piercing moment on the horizon when Mary, too, would be in great pain as she watched her son finish what he was born to do. Both his heart and hers would be pierced from the cross experience. This is part of the answer to...

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Regardless of the pain that Mary knew she would experience in watching her son suffer on the cross, she was present in both his pain and hers. John's gospel account notes that it was Mary, Jesus's mother, who was standing by the cross on that fateful day.

"...but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother..." John 19:25

Never would Jesus' mother leave him nor forsake him, especially in his hour of need. Likewise, one of the characteristics of Jesus is the one that reminds us of his continual presence with us as his followers. In fact, one of his names is Immanuel: The God who is with us. Jesus, like his mother, Mary, is with us in our darkest hour and deepest pain. Jesus told his followers that no matter what, he would be with them always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

One of the most powerful scenes of compassion and care that we mutually see displayed in the lives of Mary and Jesus toward one another is this scene referenced above where Mary is near Jesus when he is on the cross. While Mary seeks to be near, comforting and supporting her son, likewise, we see the compassion and care of the son of Mary back to his mother in this same moment.

"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home." John 19:26-27

What an incredible picture of love and compassion Jesus displayed toward his mother. While he hung there dying, he had the capacity to make sure she was taken care of in his absence. This helps complete one's understanding to the question of what child this is and would grow to be. He would be the one who loved others and loved his family to the very end. He was selfless and sacrificing beyond measure. He was kind and considerate even when experiencing his worst day in the worst way. He was the one who came willingly to go through the worst so that we, too, might be made family and have provision through his death and because of his life. For not only was this child the one who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, but also, he would be the first born from the dead. And his re-birth gives all people the opportunity to be born again and saved from our sins, just as Mary came to understand.