

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
(Mary)

MARY'S STORY

The fourth Advent candle reminds us of Mary.

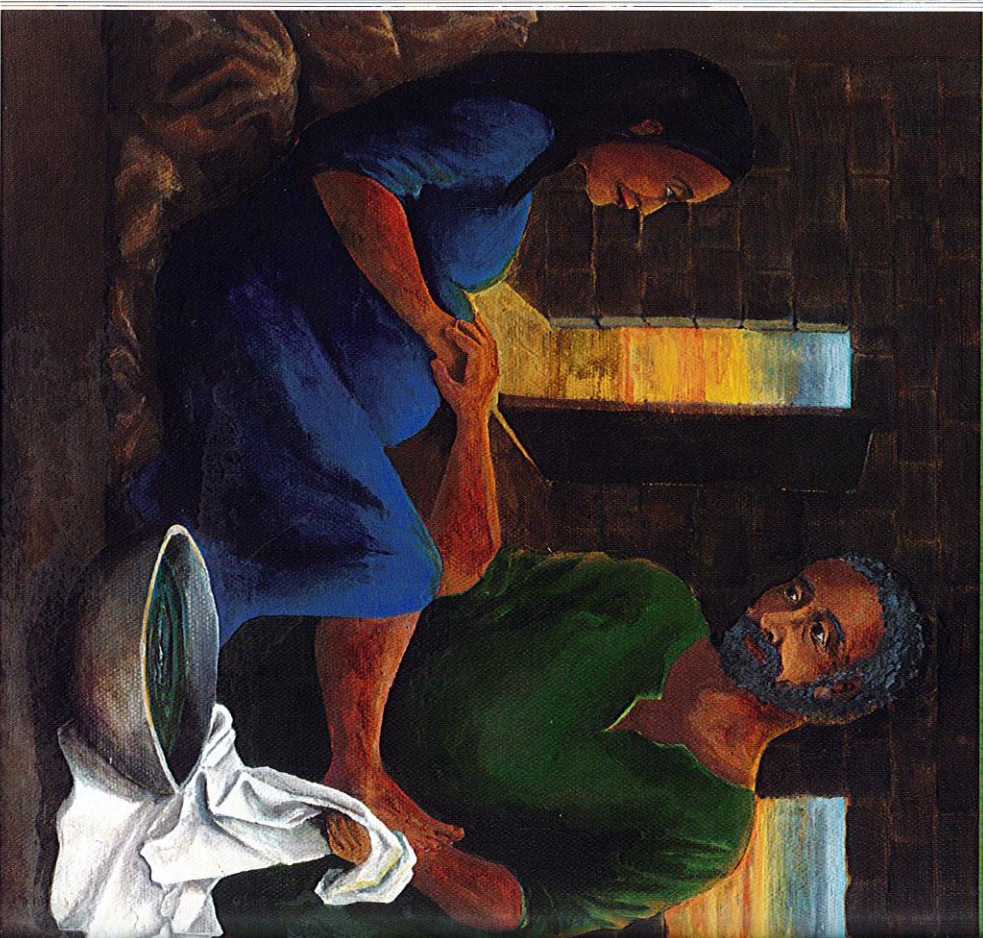
MY NAME IS MIRIAM. You probably know me by another name – Mary. I think most people do these days.

I heard that name for the first time when I was a child. We lived in Sepphoris back then. It was a big bustling town, not like Nazareth where we live now. Nazareth is sleepy and out of the way. In Nazareth everyone knows everyone else ... and everyone else's business, too. Sepphoris was different: large and wealthy and full of people from all over the world. When I was very little, I didn't know that. All the people I knew were Jewish like us. They all spoke Aramaic like we did. The people I knew, knew me, and called me by my name. Miriam.

My father was a potter and made storage jars to sell in the marketplace. They were the best storage jars in the whole of Galilee, and people would come from miles around to buy them. I used to beg to be allowed to go with him to the marketplace, but I was always too young. Then one day I was no longer too young, and I rode with him into town on his cart. It was a glorious day. I worked hard, fetching and carrying and smiling my joy at all his customers.

At the end of the day, I noticed an old Roman soldier sitting near our stall in the marketplace, basking in the late afternoon sun. He saw me looking at him and called me over.

'What's your name?' he asked.



'Miriam,' I told him.

'Maria,' he said back to me. 'A pretty name for a pretty child.'

I could see he was being kind, but he puzzled me. Maria wasn't my name, and pretty wasn't a word I'd ever thought of for myself. I said all of this to my father as we packed up the stall. Father had explained to me that the soldier was just saying my name in another language – his heart language – one I didn't know.

'Why doesn't he speak our language?' I objected. 'Everyone knows Aramaic.'

'Not everyone,' he'd said. 'And maybe he wants to be reminded of home.'

'But I'm clever and strong and quick,' I'd said, not yet ready to let my outrage go. 'I'm not pretty. I want him to think that I'm strong.'

My father had thrown back his head, then, and laughed.

'You have strong spirit, that's for sure.'

He turned and looked at me. 'Miriam,' he said, 'people will think of you whatever they choose. There's nothing you can do to control that. What you can do is find out who God created you to be. Live that life – and leave them to make of it what they will.'

I had grumbled at that. I didn't want people I didn't know changing my name and thinking whatever they felt like about me.



TONIGHT, AS I SANK WEARILY to the floor in the small, abandoned hut that Joseph had found for us on the way to Bethlehem, I remembered that day and the words of my father. I chuckled quietly to myself as Joseph bathed my poor swollen, tired feet.

'Did I tickle?' he asked solicitously.

'No,' I said, 'I was just remembering how, as a child, I wanted to protect myself against what other people thought about me. It seems rather futile now. People have thought so many things about me ... about us ... over the past few months. The thought I might have any control over it made me chuckle.'

Joseph paused, leaned over, and took my hand. 'It has been quite a time, hasn't it? The other day, I heard two people talking. One said that I knew the child was mine but was pretending it wasn't because I wanted to appear to be righteous. The other shouted over him and said it was clear you had lain with a Roman soldier and were too afraid to admit it. They were so angry with each other they nearly came to blows – just as well they didn't notice me behind them.'

I sighed. 'If only that was the worst they'd said about us. Did you ever think of walking away, from me, from this, from it all?'

'Of course I did. You know that.'

'After the angel, I mean?'

Joseph smiled in that way of his, that meant the corners of his eyes wrinkled. 'Definitely not. It isn't every day an angel tells you what to do.'

'But you didn't choose this.'

'Neither did you.'

'No. But I did say yes.' I thought back to the moment that had changed my life so completely.



THE DAY HAD BEGUN LIKE any other day. The rest of the household was out, going about their usual business. I was at home in the cool, permanent twilight of our house, half-carved into the rock of the hillside. I was idly sweeping the floor. It always felt like a pointless task: dust settled almost as fast as I could sweep it. Just then, the entire space was filled with light. I jumped in fright.

'Rejoice, favoured one,' the being had said.

I'd looked around wondering if there was someone behind me that this 'thing' full of light was speaking to but no one else was there. A thousand questions filled my mind. Who was this? Why had they come? Were they an angel? I'd never seen one before so couldn't be sure. Maybe they were? I wondered how you were meant to address an angel.

'Don't be afraid, Mary,' the what-I-presumed-to-be-an-angel had said. I was tempted to say that if he didn't want people to be afraid, he shouldn't arrive unannounced in their houses, knowing their names and scaring them witless. And then he'd told me that I was going to bear a son. I would call him 'Jesus,' he said. Jesus was going to be great and rule like David.

It made no sense. How could I be about to have a baby? I was a young girl, not even married yet. When I had been betrothed to Joseph my mother had sat me down and explained to me what was expected of a married woman. But the life she'd described was still before me. Despite what everyone now supposes, at that point I had barely met Joseph and had not even begun to imagine my future life. So I struggled to understand what the angel might mean. A baby? Me? How could that be?

The angel tried to explain but my brain took nothing more in. At the end the angel added (almost as an afterthought it seemed), 'Nothing will be impossible with God.'

In that moment something shifted in me.

'Nothing will be impossible with God.' Suddenly, I was filled with clarity. I knew he was right. Nothing would be impossible. Lots of things would be difficult – but nothing would be impossible. My mouth moved and I heard a voice that sounded like my own agreeing to it. All of it. Unimaginable though it was.



I LOOKED AT JOSEPH AND REPEARED, 'I did say yes.'

'And so did I,' he said.

Joseph had told me at the time about the angel who had appeared while he was sleeping. He had come round almost before it was light the next day and we'd held the simplest of ceremonies before he'd taken me back to his

house. He'd hoped that it would save me from the worst of the gossip, but the word had already got out. The whispers of scandal spreading more quickly than even the biting winter wind currently whipping through this abandoned hut could blow.

'What will become of us?' I asked him wearily. 'I don't even understand why we have to go to Bethlehem at all.'

'No, I don't either,' he said. 'I'd heard nothing of a census until Cousin Simeon announced it last week as he passed through, but it seems most sensible to go just in case. Besides, I imagine a break from the gossip might do you good.'

It would, of course, but I was tired and disheartened, and we still had a long way to go. At that moment, the baby stretched, a foot poking its way outwards just under my rib cage. I pushed it back in again, but as I did a flood of warmth filled my heart.

'Nothing will be impossible with God,' I whispered, and the baby fluttered a little as though in agreement with me.

'I wonder what they'll say about him,' I mused. 'After he's born. Will they understand him more than they understand us?'

'It's unlikely,' Joseph answered. 'After all, I'm not sure I do.'

I had to nod my agreement at that. There were moments when I felt I could almost glimpse the edges of what it all meant: when the angel had explained it first in my home; when I saw Cousin Elizabeth in the hill country and a

song had burst out of me fully formed. But at other times the picture faded again.

This was a special baby, I knew that. He'd caused enough trouble already for me to know that he was special. But who would he be? Would I understand him? Would anyone else?



I PLACED A HAND ON MY STOMACH and Joseph placed his on top of mine. It felt – or maybe I imagined it – that the baby pressed up against our hands. 'Nothing will be impossible with God,' we said again.

'Now all we have to do is believe it to be true,' said Joseph.

'And get to Bethlehem,' I added.

'Once we get there, everything will be normal and straightforward,' he said reassuringly.

The baby trembled beneath my hand. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought he was laughing.