

Mary's special child and mine

I probably shouldn't treat my own son like he's the Messiah. Imagine the pressure.

by [Melissa Kuipers](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Martha Park)

While I stood in line at Dollarama, clutching a shower curtain to spread across our bed for my upcoming home birth, a man behind me asked, “How’s the baby doing?”

“Good.” I turned to face him. “Kicking a lot.”

“That’s a good sign!” he said in an accent I couldn’t identify. “Maybe he will be the Savior.”

I made a sort of active listening noise, not wanting to agree, but feeling that anything contradictory I might say may lead to an argument.

“The Bible says that the Messiah will be born and will bring peace. But his name has to be Emmanuel.” He looked intently at me, as if to emphasize that world peace depended on my naming my baby correctly.

I nodded and immediately regretted it.

“People think he’ll bring war and disaster, but really it’ll be peace.” He sighed. “We need peace.”

“Yes,” I said, excited to finally have something to agree with him about. “We need to pray for peace.”

As the cashier waved me forward, the man said, “So you could name your baby Emmanuel.” I wondered if, in a scheme to usher in the Messiah, he encouraged all pregnant women he sees to name their babies Emmanuel, increasing the odds that one of them will be the chosen one.

When I was a child, my father told me I could do anything I wanted in life. “No, I can’t,” I said.

“Yes, you can,” he said with the assurance of a naive baby boomer pumped up on positive-thinking books. “If you put your mind to it, you can become anything.”

“I can never be an Olympic high jumper,” I said, aware of my athletic ineptitude.

“Yes, you can, if you really want that and you’re willing to work hard enough.”

I smiled. I knew he was wrong, but I was flattered by his confidence. But with this encouragement came a dash of anxiety: If I didn’t make something grand of myself—didn’t transform the world into a better place—did it mean I didn’t work

hard enough or want it badly?

It would be nice to believe that by simply naming my child Emmanuel I could usher in world peace. I guess I would be throwing my hat into the ring, Emmanuel being the 163rd most popular name for a boy in the US the year of this baby's birth.

It's probably problematic to treat my own offspring like he's the messiah. Imagine that kind of pressure on a child. Or, alternatively, the messiah child grows up with a narcissist complex and considers everyone around him to be blessed with salvation simply by being in his presence.

But perhaps I felt a little flattered to think that this shopper at Dollarama thinks I could be the messiah's mom. I am reminded that when my baby was born, a friend emailed me and said, "I hope, like Mary, that you ponder all these things in your heart. What will God do with this new little gift to you and the world?"

We don't have much fodder to turn Mary's child-rearing into a parenting manual (though the title *Bringing Up Jesus* has the makings of a bestseller). From the few verses we can find about Mary's parenting, we know she prophesizes at the moment of conception that this zygote will overturn tyrannical governments, but from that point on she seems to raise him as an ordinary boy. She births him in a space shared with animals. She scolds him when he takes off in the big city. He inherits the family business of carpentry until he becomes a rabbi and begins traveling at age 30.

The writer Luke, with a particular eye for the culturally disenfranchised—women, the lower classes, people who are poor and disabled—tells us the most about Mary. Upon hearing the news of her conception from the angel, she begins motherhood by singing a revolutionary prophecy about her child raising up the lowly and knocking the rulers off their thrones. When the shepherds show up at the manger, she "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

She enters into parenting contemplativeness again when Jesus slips away from his parents during a visit to Jerusalem for the Passover and hangs out at the temple, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." His parents search for him for three days before they find him chilling with the religious pundits, at which point Mary justifiably pulls out the guilt-scold: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (Luke 2:46-48).

Jesus retorts with some sass, responding that he was actually in his Father's house all along, and despite the fact that the text says they don't understand what he is saying, the next verse explains that again, "his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51). Can I treasure my child's finding his own way, his asserting his own will, the things I don't understand about him? Can I treasure all the things, the times when he is adored by others and the times that cause me stress and anxiety?

When I was a teen attending euphoric youth retreats, we sang a song by the Christian band Delirious? called "History Maker." "I'm gonna be a history maker in this land," we chanted in unison. "I'm gonna be a speaker of truth to all mankind." We sang it with gusto as an anthem, a declaration of our intentions, equal parts militant Christianity and individualistic American dream of making our mark on the world. It wasn't until decades later that I realized this was a lot of pressure to put on a young person. It wasn't until life got hard in my 20s that I realized I might not make as much history as I had hoped.

In *The Different Drum*, spiritual writer M. Scott Peck tells a fable of an old monastery that was facing imminent closure, as the five remaining monks were elderly and there were no signs of interest from younger generations. Distraught about the coming death of his community, the abbot seeks advice from a neighboring rabbi, who replies, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

The confused abbot returns home and shares this curious message with his fellow monks. They spend the next several months ruminating on this idea: Which of us could be the messiah? Is it him? Is it me? They begin to think differently about each other, about the qualities each one exhibits. As they do, they begin to treat each other, and each one himself, with the respect they would give to the Messiah.

In the following months and years, visitors to the monastery's grounds notice a change in the atmosphere. They begin to seek the counsel of the wise, elderly monks. Young men begin to ask if they can join, "thanks to the rabbi's gift."

I sometimes think of this strange gift of a conversation with a stranger who suggested I might like to name my child after the Messiah. I think of the gift of elderly neighbors sitting on their front porches or walking down the street who see my two children perched in their little green wagon as I pull them down the street. They wave frantically, say things like, "What sweet children." "That one's going to

be smart,” our 70-year-old next-door neighbor prophesizes as he presses a dollar into my four-year-old’s hand, and, less prophetically, “a lady-killer.”

I think of the joy of encouraging a child to be the change in this world, and of the way that can tip into feeling they are the only one who can make that change. I think of the tension of holding a blade of grass between two thumbs and ensuring it is taut enough to vibrate when you press your lips against it and blow. Can I hold my parenting in this tension of empowerment and the recognition of the limits of my children’s humanity, imparting to them the joy of seeking justice as well as the joy of just being in this world?

“You’re a special, wonderful child,” I say at bedtime as I press my hand on each of their heads in blessing. “I love you no matter what.” They grin and shake my hand off of their unruly hair, then try to wipe a booger on my arm. I sigh as I reach for a tissue, and I treasure all these things in my heart.