

Hail, Mary: The mother of God shouldn't show up only on Christmas

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

Several years ago, early in Advent, I received an interesting note from the sixth-graders in the church school. “Dear Mr. Buchanan: We have some questions about Christmas. 1) Did the star stand still? 2) Were the shepherds and wise men real? 3) How was Jesus born if his parents didn’t have sexual intercourse? Please meet us next Sunday and tell us the answers.”

Those are pretty good questions. My immediate response was to think that when I was in sixth grade the phrase “sexual intercourse” had not yet been uttered in my hearing. It certainly wasn’t part of a question I addressed to the minister.

I met the class the next week, ate one of the doughnuts the teacher had provided for this high occasion and discovered that postmodern sixth-graders can accept “I don’t know” as an answer to big questions. They also seemed capable of understanding that in some cases “Did it happen?” is not as crucial as “What does it mean?” When I told them I thought the virgin birth was more about Mary’s son and who he was than about Mary’s sexual behavior, they seemed to get it.

The biggest idea of all, and the greatest mystery, incarnation—the enfleshment of God—comes about when a young woman has a baby. That was the most important moment in history. Children understand that. Artists have understood it too, even when theologians and churches haven’t. That’s why Mary is the subject of the most sublime art humanity has ever produced—like Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*, a fresco on a wall at the head of a stairway at the Monastery of San Marcos in Florence, done in delicate pastels. It shows two graceful figures, meeting in subdued light, the angel kneeling, the startled young woman slightly drawing back.

This issue of the magazine directs our attention to Mary and to recent reflections on her place in scripture, theology and piety. Mary was never part of my Presbyterian experience, except at Christmas, when she made her annual appearance in crèche, greeting card and Christmas pageant. I’m glad that Protestant scholars are paying

attention to her and that Protestant piety is beginning to acknowledge her. She was, after all, the mother of Jesus, and whether or not your personal faith includes *Theotokos*, the mother of God, she deserves recognition in the story of salvation and in our piety.

The dictionary says “hail” means “to shout in welcome, to greet, cheer, salute.” I’m glad this Advent to say, “Hail, Mary!”