

Mary's Choice

Barbara Horton Jones

Shelbee Mares, Illustrator

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Shedding new light on the familiar tale of the birth of Jesus, *Mary's Choice* takes a look at the life of his mother, Mary. What might Mary have been like as a child, or as a young woman? Was she a normal kid, growing up among friends and family, or was she especially blessed? Barbara Horton Jones, a long-time student of Mary's role in the Bible, offers her perspective in this exquisitely illustrated children's book. She portrays Mary as both ordinary and special.

Jones tells the story of Mary's early years, encompassing both the timelessness of childhood and the particular circumstances of Mary's time and place in Israel. Modern children will easily identify with the busy young girl who skips, runs, and plays with her dolls. They will be intrigued by the period details, as Mary learns to spin and weave sheep's wool and, later, creates swaddling clothes for her baby out of strips of fabric.

Rich, layered paintings by New Mexico artist Shelbee Mares complement the story. Purple robes and gold embellishments lend a royal feeling to the full-page illustrations, but Mares also maintains a sense of joy and movement with her evocative brushstrokes. She captures Mary's family, the streets of her village, and the joy with which Mary approaches life. Where Jones writes about the song in Mary's heart, Mares brings it to life with a dancing Mary throwing her arms to the heavens.

The synergy of writer and illustrator is most vividly expressed in the portrayal of time's passage. Challenged to include Mary's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood in a fifty-page children's book, Jones returns repeatedly to the refrain "and the days go by." Each time it's a little different. Jones writes, "Birds sing and the days go by," or, "Sheep munch and the days go by," and Mares offers sun-drenched scenes of just such a day passing.

Mary's pregnancy may elicit questions from some children, who will likely wonder aloud about why Mary is pregnant before her marriage to Joseph. Jones very briefly addresses the question, but does not elaborate on it or the actual birth, simply announcing that Jesus "arrives" in the manger. Her focus here is not on the human details, but on the miraculous nature of the event.

Young girls will enjoy imagining themselves as young Mary, and will recognize some of her growing pains as she learns to "be herself, to think her thoughts, and feel her feelings," while remaining an obedient and joyful servant of God. Christian families will want to add this illustrated children's book to their library as both a learning opportunity and an inspiration.

SHEILA M. TRASK (November 15, 2012)

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