

## Bringing the Christmas story to life

### "Let It Be"--Mary Gives Birth to God's Plan

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Luke 1:26-45

Everybody knows who I am -- I'm Mary, the mother of Jesus. But do you really know who I am? Am I the pure, unspotted virgin, all meek and mild? Am I the Holy Mother that people can pray to if they have a hard time approaching the stern Father on His heavenly throne? Am I like a passionless pastel statue, who never doubted or feared or cried?

Who am I, really? I think you can come to know me best by looking into your own life, and recalling the times when you felt overwhelmed, confused, and afraid. At least that's where you have to begin, if you really want to know me.

I was only a teenager when my simple life was turned upside down by the visit from the angel Gabriel. In my young heart, I had felt a longing to serve God in any way He showed me. But I never expected that an actual angel would appear to me. And I never, ever would have imagined that I would have been chosen to be the mother of such an important child!

It would have been much easier if I had been hoping and praying for a child--like my elderly cousin Elizabeth. I would have blushed with humility, and then felt a joyful pride welling up inside, to think that I was chosen for such an honor. But I can't describe the turmoil that took hold of me when Gabriel told me I was going to bear God's special child before I was even married. How could my desire to serve God and do what was right have led me into something that seemed so...bizarre, so wrong?

I stood there speechless, trying to make some sense out of the angel's disturbing words that I would bear the Son of the Most High. "How can this happen?" I finally stammered. "I am a virgin!" If anybody knew that, I certainly expected God to!

Gabriel seemed to understand my confusion. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you. The baby will be holy. He will be called the Son of God." What I got from this angel talk was that God was going to do something that had never happened before, and that this child wouldn't be an ordinary human being. But what I didn't get was how people were going to believe that the baby was God's son, instead of believing that I was a sinful girl. I mean, I could scarcely believe that this was really happening myself.

Gabriel seemed to be waiting for my answer, but I felt no impatience or pressure from him. I had prayed to be shown God's will for my life. But what God was asking of me was going to be hard. Very hard. Why did God have to choose me

? And what about Joseph? I had dreamed of what it would be like being his wife, and supporting him as he started his own carpentry shop. What would happen to those dreams now? Could Joseph ever believe me? The righteous people would never bring their business to him now, if they thought there was sin in the family. Maybe I could politely decline this "honor," live a righteous life, and still pursue my own dreams. But could I ever be satisfied with my life, knowing I had refused to do what God had asked of me?

I took a deep breath and told the angel, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

"Let it be with me according to your word." With that assent, I let go of all my plans, my hopes, my dreams. I tried to look into the future, hoping Gabriel or God or someone would tell me what was in store for me now. But the angel was gone. I was staring into the darkness of the unknown, alone.

That night, I had a vivid dream that I was so close to God, I could feel Him filling every part of my body, mind, and spirit with powerful light and love. It was like being bathed, or, or flooded...I can't find any words that can describe how glorious it was. It was like being in the highest heaven. When I woke up, I felt like I was glowing from the inside out with this heavenly power. I hummed and sang to myself as I set about my earthly duties of cleaning, cooking and fetching water. But I kept thinking about the new life I was sure I was carrying inside me now. What would happen when it started to grow, and I started to show? I knew it was God's baby, and somehow everything would be alright. I had to trust that. But I sure needed someone to talk to. I needed someone who I knew would stand by me no matter what. I needed to tell my mother.

When I tried to explain it all to her, worry seized her face. "Oh, my poor Mary!" She put my head in her lap, felt my forehead, and stroked my hair like she did when I was sick with a fever. "What's happening to my poor child? I always knew you were too sensitive. Mary, everybody has strange dreams now and then. You can't believe everything that pops into your imagination. I think I've been making you work too hard. Please, just rest today--and tomorrow too. I'm sure you'll feel better soon."

"But Mama, I'm not sick! How can I make you believe this is real?" I stood up right in front of her.

My heart sank as I saw the look of fear on her face. "You know Rachael, Jethro's wife?" she asked. "When she was about your age, she was given to terrible dreams, and seeing spirits too, she said. People thought she was possessed. It went on for close to a year. But she came out of it, and now she's got two fine children. Please, Mary, don't talk about this any more. Not another word! Do you hear me, child?" She took a step back.

"Yes, Mama," and I quickly walked outside and released a flood of lonely tears. I had to talk to Joseph. He needed to know what was going on. Maybe Gabriel had told him too.

In the heat of the day, when most everyone was off the streets taking a nap, I slipped out and hurried over to Joseph's house. I tapped on his wall three times. That was our little signal for him to "go out for a walk."

I guess you would think our betrothal customs were very strange. Being betrothed to someone was as binding a commitment as being married. It could only be broken by death or divorce. A woman could get stoned for getting intimate with another man, and people would scold you if they saw you even talking to your betrothed in a personal way. So we had to be discreet.

I was very happy our families had chosen Joseph and me for each other. He was a righteous man, but not stern and stiff like my father. He had a big heart and a warm smile for everyone--especially me! I could tell he was fond of me, like I was of him.

"Mary, what brings you out on such a hot afternoon?" Joseph asked.

"Have you had any unusual dreams lately, Joseph?" I asked.

He blushed a little in spite of himself. "Mary, I have to confess I have lots of dreams these days--I mean nights--well, and days too. And you're in every one! Now why are you asking me a question like that?"

"Oh, it's nothing," I said, biting my lip.

"Mary, what's the matter with you?" He motioned me to follow him behind his father's shop where we couldn't be seen, and got me to tell him everything.

"So what you're telling me is that you're pregnant. And you want me to believe that it wasn't a man that got you pregnant. It's the Most High, the Lord of heaven and earth--blessed be His holy name. Mary, what do you take me for? That never even happened to anyone in the Scriptures. Now Mary, I'm a man of character. At least give me the courtesy of telling me the truth! Please, Mary, tell me what happened!"

The anguish on his face was too much for me to bear. I closed my eyes, my whole body trembling. "It happened just the way I told you, Joseph."

I think the cry of agony that I heard came from his soul, not his mouth, because nobody came running from their homes. I opened my eyes and looked at his face. The light that once danced in his eyes when he looked at me was now a fierce burning coal. "Go home, woman! I see that everything I believed about

you was just a dream! I can't bear this! Now go home!" He ran into his house wringing his clothes.

"God!" I cried out loud as I ran back home. "What are you doing to me? What am I supposed to do? God, I'm just a girl! I just can't bear this alone!"

As I rounded the corner near my house, I felt a profound emptiness. My house was no longer a safe home. My mother thought I was mad. If I told my father, he wouldn't rest until "justice" was done--either Joseph would be punished or I would. I felt like I had no home, no family any more.

Then I remembered. The angel had told me that my elderly cousin Elizabeth was pregnant, after all these years of being barren. Maybe she could believe in a miracle. I went into my house and told my parents I needed to go see Elizabeth.

"Whatever for?" my father demanded.

"I think we should let her go, Ezra." My mother almost looked relieved. "I think Mary needs a little change."

"But who will go with her?"

"God will go with me," I answered. I grabbed my other robe and a loaf of bread. I saw my mother hold his arm and pat his shoulder to restrain him as I headed out the door.

It was a two-day journey to Zechariah and Elizabeth's house. The determination I had felt leaving the house gave way to uncertainty as I wondered how to tell Elizabeth and Zechariah my news. They were very upright people. What if they sent me away as a disgrace to the family?

"Let it be with me according to your word," I had told the angel. Could I still trust God to be working some kind of good in all of this? Should I be like the old widow Sarah across the street, who was so beaten down by all her losses and poverty? She always says that whatever happens is God's will, and there's nothing you can do about it but suffer through it. Her heart seemed so closed. To her, God was almost her enemy, and she was His helpless victim.

"Let it be with me according to your word." Was I thinking like Widow Sarah when I said that to Gabriel?" No. My heart had been open. I had trusted God's plan, that somehow it would be good. I didn't want to be a victim. I wanted to help God's plan happen. That's still what I wanted--to help give birth to God's plan, whatever it was. "Let it be with me according to your word," I said out loud as I walked along. "Not as a helpless victim. I give You all of me, to work

through as You see fit. Just don't abandon me, God. Please let me know you haven't left me to suffer alone!"

I finally arrived at Zechariah and Elizabeth's house, bracing myself for whatever happened next. When I went to the door and called Elizabeth's name, I heard a most unusual cry of surprise and joy. "Mary! Mary!" Her round belly came bouncing toward me, followed by her old frame. Her eyes sparkled with wonder. "God has blessed you more than any other woman! And God has blessed the baby which you will give birth to! You are the mother of my Lord, and you have come to me! Why has something so good happened to me? When I heard your voice, the baby inside me jumped with joy. You are blessed because you believed what the Lord said to you would really happen."

I fell into Elizabeth's open arms, crying and laughing at the same time. Such relief and joy welled up, I couldn't contain it. "My soul praises the Lord, and my spirit sings for joy because God is my Savior! I am not important, but God has shown his care for me, his servant girl." And I began dancing around and praying this ecstatic prayer. God hadn't left me alone! And God was using me to give birth to a wonderful new plan. He was bringing down the powerful from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly--starting with me, a humble young virgin!

The three months I stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah went all too quickly. When it was almost time for Elizabeth to deliver, I heard a familiar voice at the door. It was Joseph! He was so out of breath I wondered if he had run the whole way! "Mary! Mary! I had an unusual dream too!" he panted. "I saw your angel, Mary! He told me that everything you told me about your baby is true!" Joseph looked down at my little bulge with tender awe. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you. The angel told me I should take you home with me as my wife, and be the baby's earthly father. Can we do that?"

"Let it be with me according to God's word!" I said, and I threw my arms around Joseph's neck. I didn't even care who saw us.

Well, I guess you know it wasn't "happily ever after" from then on. Giving birth to God's plan is seldom easy. When I was jostled on a donkey all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, about to deliver, I wondered why God would make us go to Bethlehem to have His baby. "Let it be with me according to your will," I kept praying, not yet knowing that we were fulfilling what the prophet had foretold.

When we couldn't even find a corner of a room at the inn, and had to rush to a stable as the labor pains came on hard, I wondered why God would allow His own Son to be born in a dirty place like that. "Let it be with me according to your will," I prayed between the pains, and with gasps and cries gave birth to the baby in a place even crude shepherds felt quite at home in. And you should have

seen the wonder on those shepherds' faces when it began sinking in that God was including the likes of them in His new plan!

When Jesus was twelve, and we were returning home from observing the Passover in Jerusalem, Joseph and I were desperate with worry when we couldn't find him in our group of travelers. It took us three days of searching to finally find him back in the Temple. I wondered what kind of boy would dare to disregard us like that. When I scolded him, he calmly looked at us and said, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I need to be in my Father's house?"

"Let it be with me according to your will," I silently prayed, and I began to let Jesus follow a path that only he and his Spiritual Father could know.

Believe me, it was hard to keep from interfering when I saw him bringing more and more trouble on himself by preaching against our religious leaders. Then I had to watch him hanging on that blood-splattered Roman cross, his chest heaving as he gasped for each breath. I didn't know how to pray any more. I didn't want to pray. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth I would start cursing God for letting His plan come to such a hideous end.

I have to confess, it was only much later that I realized that Jesus' terrible death was the fulfillment of the new plan that God had started with me. God was emptying Himself, getting down so very low and vulnerable, and taking onto himself even our haughty rejection of God. The vulnerable, forgiving love He showed us opens the way for even the lowest of us to become God's own daughters and sons. That's what God was preparing to show us when He sent Gabriel to the home of a simple virgin and invited her to help him with His marvelous new plan.

"Let it be with me according to your word." I am so glad I said that then. I am so glad I was able to say it at other very hard places along the way.

Do you know me any better now? Maybe you know yourself a little better now too. Haven't you struggled with hardships and trials you couldn't understand? Maybe not everything we endure happens for a higher purpose. But I know that some things do. If we can keep our hearts open, and trust that God is with us, no matter how hard the going, even ordinary people like you and like me can help give birth to God's marvelous plan.

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