

STORIES FROM THE STABLE PART I: MARY & JOSEPH

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Do you watch much basketball on ESPN? I don't. But I'm trying to reach out to you big sports fans with a sports analogy. After the games on the radio, or on TV, a lot of times they will have identified who the most valuable player was. Sometimes they'll bring them in for a post game interview to talk about what just happened and how they did it.

You can think of the next few weeks as the Post Game show for the first Christmas. We're going to look at what you could call some of the most valuable players in the Christmas story – key characters who shaped the events that occurred.

We'll do this somewhat chronologically, and I'd like to start this morning with the first people to learn about Jesus' birth – Mary and Joseph.

Did you ever notice that Mary and Joseph are usually talked about as a unit? You almost always hear their names together at Christmastime. Mary and Joseph. It makes sense, since they were the earthly parents of Jesus. They were one family.

But really, they have two separate stories. Each of them was brought into a relationship with Christ in a different way, and those relationships themselves were different. Mary had a visitor, Joseph had a dream. Mary asked questions, Joseph just listened. They took different paths to get to Jesus.

People don't encounter Christ in groups. It happens individually. You don't get into a relationship with Jesus just because your parents or your wife or your whole family is Christian. Everybody's experience is personal and unique.

So Mary and Joseph have two tales to tell. Their individual stories are told separately in Luke and Matthew. Let's start with Mary first.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him

the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Then the angel left her. He walks in, drops a bombshell, and then leaves Mary wondering "What just happened?" It was a mind-blowing, life changing conversation. It sounds so understated to read that "Mary was greatly troubled" and "wondered what kind of greeting this might be." But the word for troubled could be translated alarmed or agitated. It was very distressing. Her mind was going a million miles a minute trying to take it all in. Here she is, a young girl probably no more than 15 years old, trying to absorb the biggest news in history.

The Catholic church has always made a big deal about Mary – so much so that many Protestant churches have not wanted to talk about Mary at all. But she does have things to teach us. We've seen that before in Mary's interactions with Jesus at the wedding in Cana. In this story, if there's a defining overall message of Mary in this story that we can apply to ourselves, it is to **accept the role of container rather than contents**.

What do I mean by that? I mean that Mary found satisfaction in being used by God to carry out his purposes. It didn't bother her that she wasn't the center of the story, that she was only the bowl holding God's miracle. She accepted the role without hesitation. You can see that in Mary's response at the end of the passage. "May it be to me as you have said."

Luke tells us she did this because she saw herself as the Lord's servant. The purpose of her life was to give glory to God, and whatever way he chose to do that was what she was willing to accept. And when he is speaking his will to us, our job is to say, "May it be to me as you have said."

Are we as willing to be containers? That's a question I've been asking myself this week. Can I look at the things God puts on my plate and say, "I'm your servant. I accept your plan and your role for me in it."

The Bible says we're like jars of clay that hold God's glory. Jars of clay were the throw away, cheap pots. There was no mistaking them for the glory inside. No fancy design. I think if Paul were writing the Bible today, he might compare us to Gladware instead. It's

clear so you can see what's inside, and it's never mistaken for being more than functional.

I'm not sure I can honestly say I'm all about giving God the glory, that I'm always glad to be his Gladware. I think more often than not, I'm wanting what will make me look and feel good – not God.

When members of the President's cabinet or staff are asked by the press about whether or not they will stay in their post, they have a standard line that is often repeated. "I serve at the pleasure of the President." It's a reminder of who is who, and that they aren't doing their job for their own interests.

We serve at the pleasure of God, and we serve FOR his pleasure. That's our purpose, and it is both sacrificial and rewarding.

More often than not, we act as if God is there to serve our needs when it is really the other way around. Having Mary's perspective and recognizing my true status is that of a servant and a container he can use will change the way I approach God and how I respond when he asks something of me.

As life altering as the experience of giving birth to Jesus would be, as different as it was from her own dreams, Mary was able to view it as an exciting adventure. When she went to see her cousin Elizabeth, she sang a great song that we call the Magnificat:

*My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me-
holy is his name.*

She trusted the Lord enough to know that what he had planned for her was good, and that it would result in bringing him glory. Accepting God's will doesn't mean our future is one of suffering for the cause. There's a great deal of joy that comes when we have a clearer understanding of our place in God's plan.

Mary discovered some things about God in the process. She found that God is **the God of the bigger picture**.

You can see it in the conversation. The angel said, "You're going to be pregnant. It will be a son. You'll call him Jesus. He'll be a great man – He'll be the Son of God. God will make him King. A king forever."

And Mary says, "How could I be pregnant?" You can almost see Gabriel realizing, "Oh that's right. You're not in the place to understand all this yet. Here's how it will

happen.” It’s as if he got so excited about what it all meant that he got a bit ahead of Mary’s ability to keep up.

God is so far ahead of us in thinking things through. He knows how we fit into his plan, and what he has in mind for us has ripple effects. There’s a saying that if a butterfly flaps its wings in New York, it can cause a tsunami in Japan, by way of one air movement causing another and so on. Our acceptance of God’s plan for our lives isn’t just about us. We’re not at the center any more than Mary was. Jesus is, and God’s plan is all about establishing his kingdom. It is a bigger picture.

The second thing Mary learned is that **God is the God of possibilities.**

The idea of a virgin conceiving a baby seems about as far-fetched as you can get. In fact, even Mary couldn’t figure out how that would happen. She knew how babies were made, so the angel’s words didn’t make sense to her.

Why would God do things that way? Some people would say that a virgin birth was necessary in order for Jesus to be divine. Other people say that if Jesus had been born as a result of sex, he wouldn’t have been sinless. But actually, neither of those ideas is true or the point of what’s happening here. God could have infused deity into a baby with a human father, and God wasn’t making a judgment about sex by calling for a virgin birth.

Instead, what the virgin birth gives us is the reality that this was all about God’s doing and no one else’s. Jesus was not born as a result of Mary and Joseph deciding to start a family. God was the one acting. Nothing is impossible for God, the angel said. It was a miracle that only God could do.

Mary had seen God do amazing things for her cousin – unheard of things. Now he was going to do something even more unbelievable in her. Our God can do anything.

Mary demonstrated acceptance, and in so doing, she learned that she served a God of a bigger picture and a God of possibilities.

But she still had to break the news to Joseph. And apparently, that didn’t go all that well. Matthew fills us in on what happened next.

Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because

what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

PHOTO OF DENIS THATCHER

Do you recognize this man? His name was Denis Thatcher. He was the husband of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. He died recently at the age of 88. As the husband of a famous and powerful woman, his motto for his role was that he should be "always present, never there." He was a figure in the background, not the limelight.

Joseph is like that in the Christmas story. He gets far less airtime than Mary. You may notice that he never even speaks in Scripture, so he comes across as this silent presence, sort of in the shadow of his wife. The biggest topic about Joseph is that he WASN'T the father of Jesus. It's his non-involvement that he gets remembered for.

But there's more to him than that. Matthew tells us he was a good, righteous man. And how he handled this situation had a huge impact on the shape of Jesus' earthly life.

If Mary teaches us about accepting the role of a servant, Joseph teaches us about **acting on God's commands**. Here he was about to call off the wedding, to cancel the whole thing. Then he has this dream. And when he wakes up, Luke tells us that Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.

Joseph shows us that once we do accept Christ into our lives and accept the fact that we're here to serve him, we then change our actions accordingly. We line up with what we say we've accepted.

I heard a story on NPR this week about Uday Singh. Uday was from India, and he had applied for citizenship in the United States. While he was waiting for his paperwork to go through, he joined the U.S. Army. Two weeks ago, he died in Iraq. Reporters went to his parents (who are still in India) to ask how they felt about their son dying in a war that their country did not support.

Uday's father, who had served in India's army said, "Uday joined the United States Army. When you join an army, whether it is India's army or the U.S. or any country, you fight when the army fights. That's the job of a soldier. Period."

Soldiers don't negotiate for which battles they want, and neither do followers of Christ. As his servants, as his soldiers, we act on his commands and choose obedience.

When Joseph did that, he too learned things about God. Just as Mary saw God in a new light, Joseph began to understand new dimensions of God's character.

First he learned that God is the **God of the better way**. Matthew relates Joseph's dilemma to us, and tells us that he had come up with a good plan. It was his desire to spare Mary any embarrassment. He knew he wasn't the father of this baby, and he didn't want that to become a big public scandal. It was because he was a good man that he wanted to arrange for a quiet divorce.

That was a noble, respectable thing to do, based on right motives. But God had a better way. He wanted Joseph to go through with the marriage, to adopt Jesus as his son.

I think sometimes we are more comfortable giving up sin to God than giving up the good in ourselves. Just like Joseph found, even our best efforts need to be released to him.

What enabled Joseph to do that? The turning point was when the angel said that what was conceived in Mary was of the Holy Spirit. It was knowing that God really was in this.

If we have put our faith in Christ, then what has been conceived in each of our hearts is of the Holy Spirit. He is present in our lives. Knowing that means we give him control and give him our best, believing that he is the God of the better way.

Joseph also learned that God is the **God of no fear**. The angel told him he shouldn't be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Gabriel also told Mary not to be afraid.

Imagine being Joseph. Mary tells him, "I have some news for you that you're not going to believe. I'm pregnant. But I really wasn't cheating on you. It's a miracle." Joseph isn't buying it. He's not going to argue with her, but the marriage is off. There's too much at stake. We saw a couple weeks ago what the religious leaders would do if they caught someone in adultery. At the very least, his reputation would be tarnished. There are a lot of repercussions to be afraid of if he married Mary.

And if Joseph believed the child was God's son, that would be another reason for fear. What would it be like to be responsible for raising that kind of child? Was he prepared to provide for a family financially? There would be so many unknowns.

One day when Isaac was around 4, I asked him to move a stack of magazines. He told me he would have to do it carefully so he didn't get a paper cut. I realized then that I might have gone a little overboard in instilling caution in him.

Fear is probably the biggest inhibitor of action in our lives. It's a protective instinct that works to our benefit, but it also keeps us from doing what we should. We fear what other people will think, we fear the unknown and we fear losing what we have and enjoy.

We had my work Christmas party this last Tuesday night. Employees and spouses all got to go out to a nice dinner, and Karin and I were sitting next to three couples. In the course of the conversation, people asked about church and our kids, and I felt myself hesitating to jump in full force, waiting for the exactly right questions to talk about God in specific ways. But Karin dove right in and shared Scripture verses and engaged in a deeper level of conversation with people.

And I realized afterwards that there's never a perfect time to do what God's telling you. It will always require overcoming fear and inhibitions, getting outside of ourselves to do something bold.

That was my thought on Friday as I went to a client Christmas party. There was one person in particular that I wanted to talk to about God. He always asks about how the church planting is going, and I wanted to give him one of our new brochures and a candy bar. And I realized that I could either wait in the day for the ideal time, or I could just grab the stuff and give it to him at the earliest opportunity. And guess what? That's what happened. It became an ideal moment and it wasn't scary anymore. We had a good conversation and I learned more about where he is at spiritually.

It wasn't a huge task God was asking me to do – nothing like Joseph's. And I still reviewed my conversation and wish I had said some things differently. But it reminds me of the importance of not giving in to fear, because God is the God of no fear.

Jesus demonstrated that on the cross. Like his mother Mary, Jesus accepted his role.

Philippians 2:7-8

*(Jesus) made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death-
even death on a cross!*

He submitted his own completely human desire to live to his completely divine desire to offer to save us from death. He did it for the glory of God the Father.

Like his adopted father, Joseph, Jesus didn't just mentally accept God's plan – he acted on it. He didn't give in to fear, but courageously handed his best over to God, who turned it into something even better. That passage in Philippians goes on to say that God exalted Jesus to the highest place – just like the angel predicted.

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper together, the lives of Mary and Joseph pose some questions for us to consider:

1. Am I ready to be Gladware for God's glory?

Are we able to say, "Whatever gives you glory God -- Let it be to me as you have said?"

2. What fears are blocking my action?