

Magnificat ¹

As darkness falls on this Christmas Eve, December's frantic pace is subsiding into quietness. You've come here to worship with your family because it's right to celebrate spiritually significant events in spiritually significant ways.

Most of you know "the Christmas Story." You could probably tell the main points of the story without even opening a Bible. But there's more to the story than you know, and tonight I'm going to tell that story in a way you've never heard it before. Actually, I sent this story to your pastor so that he could tell it to you on my behalf. I know the story more completely than any other save very God Himself. How can that be? My name is Mary, the wife of Joseph, son of Jacob, son of David the King. My name is Mary, the mother of Jesus our Lord, who sits even now at the Father's right hand.

I suppose that in order to tell the story completely one should begin at the beginning of creation itself, and that's how the Scriptures tell it. For tonight, though, I'll begin when I was thirteen years old.

I grew up in Nazareth in Galilee, the oldest of six children. Daddy was a simple farmer, and Mama was—well, she was a Mama, like every other mother in Israel. I was considered fair to look upon, and once I had reached thirteen, the beginning of marriageable age, Daddy got many inquiries about possible matches with various young men in town. We all knew, though, that eventually I would be married to Joseph, son of Jacob the carpenter, because Joseph and I had been head over heels in love for as long as anyone could remember.

Joseph was seven years older than I. He could have easily been married already, but because of our love, he was waiting for me to become old enough so he could marry me! And sure enough, when I was nearly fourteen, Joseph's

¹ A sermon by Dr. David Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 24, 2016.

father came to Daddy to work out the arrangements, and Joseph and I were publicly betrothed to each other in a glad ceremony in the synagogue, with all of Nazareth looking on.

In that time, betrothal was more significant than your engagement today. Betrothal meant that we were husband and wife before God and before the world, linked by law though not yet in the flesh. As is your custom, the time between betrothal and the wedding ceremony was usually several months—and sometimes as much as a year—for weddings take much preparation. But unlike today, there was no such thing as a broken engagement. The only way to dissolve betrothal was to legally divorce.

Once we were betrothed, Joseph immediately began to build a little house for us, which obviously had to be completed prior to our marriage—another reason for the period of waiting, however difficult! For my part, Mama and I began sewing and gathering those foundational necessities you take care of today through wedding showers. It was a glad time, though I could tell Daddy was sad to think of letting me go. Our relationship had always been very close, and though Daddy loved Joseph, and though Joseph and I would live only a short distance away, it was hard for him to think about the changes that were coming.

Our wedding was still four months away when the nature of our planning became very, very different. I was working alone in the house one afternoon when the room suddenly became filled with a very strange light, and I became aware of someone standing behind me. When I turned to see who it was, I saw what looked like a man, surrounded by brilliant light—light as bright as the sun, yet not hurtful to my eyes.

The angel—for an angel he was, named Gabriel—said to me, “Don’t be frightened Mary. God has decided to bless you! You are going to become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very

great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

“But how can I have a baby?” I asked, in shock and confusion. “I am a virgin.”

Gabriel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she’s already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

What was I to do? I didn’t know what to do! I simply said, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true.” When I said this, the angel disappeared, and I was alone once more. But even as I stood there trembling, I knew something was happening in my body. This something began at once, and lasted all day long. When I awoke the next morning I could still feel the change, and I knew that it had really happened. I had not dreamed it.

Can you imagine telling such a story to your parents, or far worse, to your betrothed? I waited a week or two, hoping my body would return to normal, but finally I had to tell Mama, and then Daddy, what was happening. They had a really hard time with the news. Wedding plans were now shattered. Nothing could go on as before. Daddy tried to be brave, reminding Mama, “Remember the prophets, Mama. They told us that Messiah would be born of a virgin”—but he couldn’t look me in the eye. I could tell he was struggling.

Joseph responded first with shock, then with anger, and then with fear. He wanted to believe me, I knew he did, but he, too, struggled mightily with

this news. “Joseph,” I said softly, “if you cast me out, if you divorce me for adultery, I will be stoned in the street. You know the penalty.” The angel had said this was good news, but it surely didn’t feel like good news.

Mama and Daddy finally decided to send me to Elizabeth’s house while they and Joseph sorted out how to handle this perplexity. I liked Elizabeth, and I expected that her nearly-as-miraculous pregnancy would make us very close, but I was also afraid. “Mama,” I said, “I’ve never been away from home before. I’m only thirteen!”

When I got to Elizabeth’s house, she exclaimed, “You are blessed by God above all other women, and your child is blessed. What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me! When you came in and greeted me, my baby jumped for joy the instant I heard your voice! You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

This was an unexpected but very welcome confirmation from the Lord that I wasn’t going crazy, and that things might turn out well after all. I, too, was filled with the joy of God’s Spirit, and answered her, “Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.”

I stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months—until it was time for her baby to be born. I was now beginning to look pregnant, and I didn’t look forward to going back to Nazareth, but what else was to be done? And what would happen then? I had heard nothing from Joseph. What if he had decided to divorce me? Surely the townspeople must be urging him to do that by now.

The fact is that Joseph had indeed decided to divorce me to save his family’s honor, but as quietly as possible, hoping that there would be no

stoning, because he still loved me. As I was on the way home, though, another angel came to my beloved in a dream, saying “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

The angel reminded Joseph of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us).” And as I had done months before, Joseph obeyed the angel’s instruction and took me home to be his wife, though I remained a virgin until Jesus was born.

As though all this weren’t enough, things went from painful to awful. My time had almost come when Augustus, the Roman Emperor, decreed that a census was to be taken through out the Empire. This meant that every man had to return to his ancestral town to be registered. Because Joseph’s family was originally from Bethlehem, this meant that he would have to travel the more than seventy miles to Bethlehem for that registration.

Although the journey would be long and hard, and a little dangerous, even if I were not already in my ninth month, I decided to travel with my beloved. Our parents strongly objected to this, but I was so happy to be reunited with Joseph that I couldn’t bear the thought of being separated from him again.

The journey to Bethlehem was hard and the nights were cold, but those few days were a delight for Joseph and me. As we walked and talked, Joseph asked, “Are you afraid, Mary?” And I answered, “Not so long as you are with me. No matter what people are saying, they are wrong. This child that I carry is the child of no man, but as I told you in the beginning, is the child of Him who created us all, the child who is destined to be our deliverer. And Joseph, just because it is my body that will bear him does not mean that he is

any less your child than mine. Once I have borne and suckled this child my task will be largely finished. But yours, Joseph, will be only beginning. You were chosen, too.ⁱ

My labor began before we reached Bethlehem. I had to fight nausea, along with the grinding anguish that began to gnaw slowly at my back, then came in overwhelming waves as I grimly hung onto our little donkey. Sweat poured down my face as I gripped the bundles before me until my knuckles were white. “Hurry, Joseph! Oh, Joseph, please hurry!” I cried. If only there were some refuge where I could give way to this agony!

You know, as I did not, that there would be no refuge. The kind innkeeper had no room, but sent us just outside of town to Migdal Eder, the Tower of the Flocks, where he knew there would be room for us.ⁱⁱ Joseph put in fresh hay while I groaned into the gathering birth-storm. Between contractions, I told him, “Joseph, if I die in this, if it destroys me utterly, you must know one thing. I did not sin. I have been faithful to you. You are the only man I have ever loved.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yeshua, Jesus, the Son of God, was born, not in our little house in Nazareth, but in a borrowed birthing stall with only poor, terrified Joseph to help me. And as Joseph gently put the Child of Destiny in my arms, I was flooded with that ecstasy that only mothers know, the Great Joy that follows the Great Ordeal.

And so it was that the words of the prophets were accomplished through the cruel decree of Caesar: “But you, O Bethlehem, are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies until the time when the woman in labor gives birth to her son. . . . And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD’s strength, in the majesty of the name

of the LORD his God. . . . And he will be the source of our peace” (Micah 5:2–5).

There were more angels that night—more than could be counted! They appeared to shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem, announcing and singing in an enormous chorus, “The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David! You will find him lying in a manger. Glory to God in the highest heaven!” And when they recovered from their terror, all those shepherds hurried to the Tower of the Flocks and found us, just as the angels had said.

You’ve gathered tonight to remember these things, and for this I am glad. But there is more, much more. This is just the beginning of the Story, as births always are. There is no time now for anything like a complete telling of what came after, but there are a few things you, too, must know.

I’ll save the story of our flight to Egypt and our return to Nazareth for another time.^{iv} For another day, too, is the story of Joseph’s untimely death, leaving me to depend on Jesus for help in raising his six younger brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3).

There’s a song that you often sing about me at Christmas that points to the things you must know tonight. It goes like this: “Mary, did you know that your baby boy would some day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you’ve delivered, will soon deliver you.

“Mary, did you know that your baby boy is LORD of all creation? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations? Did you know that your baby boy is heaven’s perfect Lamb? This sleeping child you’re holding is the great I AM.”^v

The truth is that I knew very little about what was coming. When we were talking about our boys before their births, Elizabeth had said to me, “The mother of a man of destiny pays dearly for the honor”; and when we dedicated little Jesus in the Temple when he was eight days old, the prophet Simeon had said, “This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul” (Luke 2:34-35).

I thought Joseph’s death was sword enough; but many years later, when I watched my Yeshua crucified, and when I watched Him die, the sun itself refused to shine as Creation mourned its Creator’s suffering (Matthew 27:45). My Jesus, you see, is your Jesus, too. He gave Himself as the Ultimate Sacrifice, opening the door that brings home to God all who choose to enter it.

Nor is this yet the end of my story. I gave Jesus birth. I watched Him die. And with my own eyes I saw Him live again! (Acts 1:14). Bethlehem’s manger was the beginning of a Glory into which, I, too, have entered, and into which my Jesus, my son, my Lord, invites each of you. His name is not just Jesus, but also “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). May His Peace and His Joy rest with you tonight. I hope to see you on the Other Side!

ⁱ Marjorie Holmes, *Two from Galilee* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1972), pp. 166-167, 193).

ⁱⁱ The Tower of the Flocks is a stone watchtower from which the Temple shepherds watched over their flocks. That particular tower has been there since Jacob first came to Bethlehem almost 4,000 years ago (Genesis 35:21), and it has been known as “Migdal Eder” (migdahl ayder), or “The Tower of the Flocks” ever since. The Temple flocks have been kept near that tower since King Solomon built the first Temple nearly 3,000 years ago.

Now while the Temple flocks live outdoors all year, there is one occasion when a ewe is brought indoors, and that’s when she’s ready to give birth. The Temple shepherds maintain a special, ceremonially clean stable in The Tower of the Flocks, where they bring those ewes for birthing; and there, where the sacrificial lambs are born, was born the One who would bear all our Sin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holmes, p. 205.

^{iv} See Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (New York: Knopf, 2005) for a beautiful telling of this story.

^v Mark Lowry, “Mary, Did You Know?”