

# December 22, 2019

## Good News of Joy (or Not) for Mary

### Luke 1:26-38

Sometimes life throws us a curve ball. Just when we think we have everything nicely in order, something unexpected comes along and disrupts our plans. Our health goes sideways. We lose our job. We need to replace the furnace. A close friend or family member dies. What do we do? What do we do when the unexpected happens?

#### ***Mary's story ...***

When we look at the Christmas story, we often idealize Mary. She is there, beside the manger, looking radiant and very composed after having her first child. There is usually a halo behind her head. Everything in her life is wonderful.

It wasn't actually that way at all. Every year we read this passage; it becomes so familiar that we romanticize it. And we lose the drama of what is really taking place.

Mary is pledged to be married to Joseph. In ancient Jewish custom, the two families would arrange a marriage and negotiate a dowry for the bride that would be paid to the bride's father. A public announcement was made. At this point the couple is "pledged." It is similar to our engagement, but much more legally binding. Even though the couple is not yet officially married, their relationship can now only be broken through death or divorce. This betrothal lasted a year. During this year the bride and groom still lived with their respective parents. This waiting period proved the bride's purity. If she was found to be pregnant during the time, the marriage could be annulled. Otherwise, after the year, the couple would be married and begin life together.

It is during this year of waiting that the angel appears to Mary. We sometimes read the story of the angel's message and sigh, "*How wonderful.*" But Mary's life is about to be turned upside down. If she were found to be pregnant during that betrothal year, the assumption could only be that she has been unfaithful to Joseph. This was not a culture that accepted unwed mothers. According to Jewish law, Joseph should divorce her, relegating her – at best – to a life of poverty and shame. The law actually decreed the penalty for sex-outside-marriage could be death by stoning, although it was rarely enforced anymore (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). There were serious implications if Mary were to accept the angel's announcement.

Matthew records that Mary was "*found to be with child*" (Matthew 1:18) – which suggests she didn't hurry to tell Joseph, but eventually the truth could no longer be hidden. What would happen? Would Joseph understand? How could he?

Joseph has a difficult decision to make. To marry Mary would be an admission that he was the father and had gone against God's laws. He knew that wasn't true. To marry her would mean that he was accepting her obvious unfaithfulness. To have a public divorce would expose Mary to public disgrace and possible physical harm. The best he could do was divorce her privately before two witnesses. All of Joseph's hopes and dreams and all of Mary's hopes and dreams were flying out the window.

The angel's news was not really good news for Mary, was it? How did she respond? *"Mary was greatly troubled at (the angel's) words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be ..."* (Luke 1:29).

If she was like most of us her prayer would have been, *"Lord, Thy will be changed."* But her real prayer is, *"Thy will be done."* *"May it be to me as you have said"* (Luke 1:38). It's one of the most courageous prayers ever prayed by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Even though Mary's world is about to be turned upside down and backward – even though she had no idea what the future will hold (but it didn't look good) – even though her dreams and hopes appear to be going up in smoke – she prays, *"May it be to me as you have said."* Did she say that in resignation? Or is there a sense of hope, peace, love, and joy that comes through those words?

### ***Our story ...***

Our specific situations will be very different than Mary's. But the reality of life spiraling out of control, on occasion, is universal. What do we do when our lives get turned upside down? How do we find hope, peace, love, and joy, when life is in an uproar?

Struggles come in different forms.

- For some of us it's crises in relationships.
- For some of us it's loneliness and grief.
- For some of us it's mental health issues.
- For others of us it's physical pain and health problems.
- For others of us it is employment or financial stress.

Where's the good news?

Perhaps we need to rethink our response to crises. When I developed my chronic pain, a friend gave me a fascinating book by Philip Yancey and Paul Brand (a retired doctor, who spend most of his career working with leprosy patients), *The Gift of Pain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). The authors have a fascinating chapter entitled "Pleasure and Pain."

Leonardo Da Vinci, they note, once sketched a figure splitting into two at the belly: two torsos, two heads, and four arms (like Siamese twins joined at the waist). He called it *"Allegory of Pleasure and Pain,"* commenting, *"Pleasure and Pain are represented as twins, as though they were joined together, for there is never one without the other ... They are made with their backs turned to each other because they are contrary the one to the other. They are made growing out of the same trunk because they have one and the same foundation, for the foundation of pleasure is labor with pain, and the foundations of pain are vain and lascivious pleasures"* (p. 289).

We typically think of pleasure as the opposite of pain. Pleasure and pain are opposite ends of the spectrum. Most of our lives we live somewhere in between, but we're desperately trying to get toward happiness.

Brand notes however that leprosy patients, who have lost the sense of pain altogether, have no pleasure. And he notes that many of us, particularly in North America, have surrounded ourselves with all sorts of things and experiences that are supposed to give us pleasure, and yet they don't. His theory is that human experience is really like a flat plain of dull, humdrum

experience, yet in the middle is a single central peak that represents **Life** (with a capital L), the point at which pain and pleasure meet.

Think about it ... what things really give us pleasure? Is it really the complete absence of pain? If we were to live in an isolated, insulated mansion, full of soft couches, with all our needs met, would we be happy? Look at the experiences of those who have had that opportunity? Have they been happy? (Watch the movie *Wall-e*)

Or (within limits) are we happiest when there is a bit of stress in our lives. When our palms are sweating, our heartbeat is racing, and adrenaline is pumping? Hard work and exercise, which in the short term seem like a lot of pain, paradoxically lead to the pleasure in the long term. During my summers at university, every day I cycled five to ten kilometres to work, worked eight-hour days as a bricklayer's helper (hauling concrete blocks and mortar up three flights of stairs), cycled ten kilometers to the university, swam close to a kilometre, then cycled ten kilometres home. On evenings and weekends, I played soccer, hiked, and cycled. I was never more sore. And I was pretty happy.

Musicians, dancers, athletes, soldiers – they become their best through a regimen of effort and struggle. No shortcuts. The Chinese writer, Lin Yutang, lists thirty supreme pleasures in life, most linking pleasure and pain. For example: *"To be dry and thirsty in a hot and dusty land and to feel great drops of rain on my bare skin – ah, is this not happiness To have an itch in a private part of my body and finally to escape from my friends and go to a hiding place where I can scratch – ah, is this not happiness."* (p.300)

Yancey and Brand quote Augustine: *"The victorious general holds his triumph: yet unless he had fought, he would never have won the victory; the greater the danger in battle, the greater the joy in the triumph. The storm tosses seafarers about and threatens them with shipwreck: they all grow pale at their coming death. Then the sky and the sea become calm and they exult exceedingly, just as they had feared exceedingly. A dear friend is ill, and his pulse tells us of his bad case. All those who long to see him in good health are in mind sick along with him. He gets well again, and although he does not yet walk with his former vigor, there is joy such as did not obtain before when he walked well and strong. Everywhere a greater joy is preceded by a greater suffering"* (p. 300).

*"If I spend my life seeking pleasure through drugs, comfort, and luxury,"* Yancey and Brand write, *"it will probably elude me. Lasting pleasure is more apt to come as a surprising bonus from something I have invested myself in. Most likely the investment will include pain – it is hard to imagine pleasure without it"* (p. 301).

### ***God's Story in our story ...***

Mary, apparently, can see in the crises set before her the opportunity that was hers as well. It's a miracle she can see any possibilities at all. Without God's help, she could never have seen any blessings – just disaster.

What about us? We may not see any possibilities amid our problems either. We may see few if any possible blessings. We may only see the pitfalls.

We are in good company. The wisdom of saints down through the ages, including Mary, is that difficult times come. That's just life. But in the difficult times, God is faithful. He can – and will

– bring us through. Sometimes it takes a miracle: an angel had to appear to Joseph. Sometimes He does it in ordinary ways. God doesn't miraculously take Mary's problems away, but He will get her through them. She will be a lifetime of challenge, struggle, and heartache, as well as hope, peace, love, and joy.

Lou Holtz, former football coach, once quipped, "*It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it.*" If we try to carry it on our own, it will break us. But if we recognize that God is with us through bad and the good times, in the struggles as well as in the successes, in the pain as well as the pleasure, we can make it through. When God becomes central to our story, we discover His hope, peace, love, and joy.

Holtz also coined the phrase (since quoted by Charles Swindoll and others), "*Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it.*" If we can respond with faith in the God who loves us, is for us, and will get through, we'll be OK.

My own personal experience with pain has continued now for over twenty years. On the one hand, I hate it. I would love to be free of it. But on the other hand, the fact that some days the pain is so intense I have to depend completely on God is a good thing. It reminds that I cannot carry the load. I need God's help. It's in those times of pain that I discover the joy of knowing God's presence and strength. Without the pain, I may never know that pleasure.

The familiar poem, Footprints, speaks to the circumstance, Mary, me, and countless others have faced:

*One night I dreamed a dream.  
As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.  
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.  
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,  
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.*

*After the last scene of my life flashed before me,  
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.  
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,  
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,  
there was only one set of footprints.*

*This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.  
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you, You'd walk with me all the way.  
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,  
there was only one set of footprints.  
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."*

*He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you  
Never, ever, during your trials and testings.  
When you saw only one set of footprints,  
It was then that I carried you."*

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