

December 6, 2020
Peace in a Peace-less Place
Luke 1:26-38

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Mary's Story

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It wasn't actually that way at all. When we romanticize this passage, we lose the drama of what is really taking place. In ancient Israel, marriages were arranged. The families would agree to a marriage, negotiate the details, including a dowry to be paid to the bride's father. Then a public announcement would be made. At this point the couple is "pledged" for a year. It is similar to our engagement, but more legally binding. Even though the couple is not officially married, their betrothal could be broken only through death or divorce. During this year the bride and groom lived with their respective parents and had little to do with each other. The couple often barely knew one another.

This year-long waiting period was to prove the bride's purity. All going well, after the year the couple would be married and begin life together. If she was found to be pregnant during the time, clearly she was unfaithful, and the marriage would be annulled. It was during this year of waiting that the angel appeared to Mary and she became pregnant.

We can read this story and sigh, *"How wonderful! To be chosen by God!"* But Mary's life was about to be turned upside down. When she is found to be pregnant during that year of waiting, the assumption would be that she had had an illicit affair. This was not a culture that tolerated infidelity. This was not a culture that accepted unwed mothers. According to Jewish civil law, Joseph would be expected to divorce her, relegating her – at best – to a life of poverty and shame. The law actually declared the penalty for unchastity was death by stoning, though it was rarely enforced anymore ([Deuteronomy 22:23-24](#)).

There will be serious consequences if Mary were to accept the angel's announcement.

Mary's story is also Joseph's story. Matthew records that Mary was *"found to be with child"* (Matthew 1:18) which suggests that she did not hurry to tell anyone, but eventually the truth could no longer be hidden. What would happen? Would Joseph understand? How could he? To marry Mary would be an admission that either he was the father and had gone against God's laws – he knew that wasn't true. The only other possibility was

Mary was unfaithful; to marry her would mean he was accepting her obvious immorality. He is between a rock and a hard place. 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 Mary's hopes and dreams for a decent life were flying out the window. Life – God – had thrown them one wild curve ball.

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

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

Our story ...

No one else in history has faced the same crisis Mary did. Our particular situations are very different than hers. But the reality of life throwing us curve balls – unexpected challenges – is something we all face. What do you do? What do you do when life gets turned upside down? When life is in an uproar, how do you find hope? Peace?

It may be we need to rethink our approach to crises. When I developed my chronic pain condition, I read a fascinating book by Philip Yancey and Paul Brand (a retired doctor, who spend most of his career working with leprosy patients), entitled, *The Gift of Pain*.

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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 labour with pain, and the foundations of pain are vain and lascivious pleasures"* (quoted on p. 289).

Dr. Brand notes that many of us have surrounded ourselves with all sorts of things and experiences that are supposed to dull our pain and give us pleasure. But without feeling any pain, we struggle to really experience pleasure. 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? Most often not really ...

Or are we happiest 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 greatest pleasures in the long term. During my summer break at university, every day I cycled 15 kilometres to work to Franklin School, worked eight hour days as a bricklayer's helper (hauling concrete blocks and mortar up three flights of stairs), cycled 18 kilometres to the university, swam close to a kilometre, then cycled 8 kilometres home. On evenings and weekends, I played soccer, hiked, and cycled. I was never more sore! And I was happy!

Musicians, ballet dancers, athletes, artists, writers – anyone really – only know the thrill of success after a regimen of practice, effort and struggle. Out of the pain comes a sense of pleasure. 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!"* (in Yancey and Brand, p. 300)

Yancey and Brand quote Augustine (354-430 AD), a saint who lived in North Africa: *"What is it that goes on within the soul, since it takes greater delight if things that it loves are found or restored to it than if it had always possessed them? The victorious general holds his triumph: yet unless he had fought, he would never have won the victory, and the greater was the danger in battle, the greater is 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 becomes 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 vigour, 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).

It's a paradox. A mystery. *"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).

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We're in fine company. The saints through the ages, including Mary, have faced difficult times. Read through [Hebrews 11](#) – a who's who of people in Bible, many of whom went through tough, tough times (FYI, of Jesus 12 disciples, only John dies a natural death). But in the tough times, God is faithful. He brings us hope when things seem hopeless. He brings us peace, when things seem peaceless. Sometimes He gets us through in ordinary ways. Sometimes it takes a miracle (an angel had to appear to deal with Joseph). Sometimes, He simply encourages our hearts and souls as we muddle through the darkest of dark valleys (notice, God doesn't miraculously take Mary's problem away ... but He does get her through it). Through it all, we discover a hope and peace we would never have known if the challenges hadn't come.

Great Scriptures can help us find peace. Spend some time with Romans 8:26-39: *"If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one - for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one - for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand, pleading for us.*

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is our good news. Good news of hope. Good news of peace in a peaceless world.

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