

# How Shall This Be?



## A MESSAGE FROM THE CHRISTMAS STORY

I am impressed with law students. You are smart and hardworking and ambitious. Some of you have your lives pretty well mapped out: you know where you will be working and living and how much you will be making in a year or two. || BY JANE H. WISE



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Others of you may not have planned that far ahead, but the fact you are in law school shows you planned and prepared to get where you are today, and you probably feel like you are in control of your life. If you feel that way right now, you won't after a careful look at the Christmas story. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."<sup>1</sup>

Luke tells us the angel Gabriel came to a virgin named Mary and said to her, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."<sup>2</sup> But she was "troubled"<sup>3</sup> by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. This was the beginning of God's interruption in Mary's life, and she was troubled. She was a young woman with an ordinary dream of marrying and having children with Joseph. Their families had signed a betrothal contract. But at the commencing of this miracle, we learn that being troubled signals the beginning of God's intrusion into an otherwise ordinary life.

Think of the times when something unanticipated and out of the ordinary arises, something that troubles you. Perhaps here at school a professor (pick the one that would trouble you the most) stops you to say she needs to see you in her office at 5:00 p.m. to talk about something pretty important. You paste a smile on your face, but you are troubled. A phone rings in the middle of the night, waking you and almost simultaneously creating knots in your stomach. A pregnancy test is positive, and then the nausea begins. At first we may be troubled or perplexed or even excited by these signals. What does it mean? The comfortable status quo in our lives is about to be changed. The thin veneer of the ordinary has just been pierced, and now we feel out of control.

"Fear not, Mary," the angel said, "for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus."<sup>4</sup> Then Mary said, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"<sup>5</sup> She is no longer troubled; she is now probably terrified.

"How shall this be?" Have you ever said that? I have said that. People say those words on the day their well-con-

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structed and planned-out life is suddenly invaded by something too great for them to control. Things happen that we don't choose: a job is lost; a move must be made and then another move; a loved one dies; notice comes that a biopsy must be performed. On those nights we lie in bed staring at the ceiling, asking, "How shall this be?"

The ordinary, comfortable, even safe life has been interrupted. Things are not what were hoped for; they are not what was planned for. God has interrupted, pushing aside the ordinary to conceive something out of the ordinary. We may not understand it, and we may not be able to manage it. What can we do? We can receive it, as frightening as that sounds. And if we read the Christmas story right, this out-of-the-ordinary interruption will prove more valuable than anything we could ever plan.

The angel responds to Mary's question by telling her that the Holy Ghost through "the power of the Highest"<sup>6</sup> has conceived this child. It is then that Mary makes her great declaration of faith: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."<sup>7</sup>

This might be the hardest thing of all to do with God's interruptions—choosing to embrace them. We move from being troubled to being terrified to choosing to embrace the interruption as a gift from God.

Now here is a caveat: We are looking at the Christmas story in which angels heralded each of God's interruptions—*God's* interruptions. But not every interruption in life is conceived by God. Tragic interruptions in life come about through bad choices—ours and others'—or simply from living in this fallen world where disease and accidents are prevalent. But we do know that no interruption is ever greater than God's, and He can inject hope in the midst of every tragic loss. It's up to us to choose like Mary chose, to embrace the interruption and come to see it as the tender birth of a miracle. Another truth we learn from this story is that "with God nothing shall be impossible."<sup>8</sup>

Lest you think you are out of this crucible because the interruption didn't happen to you: the choice to embrace the inter-

ruption has to be made, not only by those whose lives are interrupted like Mary's but by everyone connected to her.

Mary was engaged to Joseph. There were three stages to the process of betrothal. First came the legally binding contract that was signed by the families as well as by outside witnesses. Money and gifts were exchanged, and an official announcement was made. The second stage was the period of betrothal that lasted one year and helped assure the groom that his affianced wasn't pregnant. Because the relationship had already been made legally binding, during this year the man and woman were considered husband and wife even though they remained separated. These arrangements could only be terminated by divorce. But what everyone hoped, of course, was that the couple would make it to the third stage, when there would be a wedding, and the marriage would finally be consummated after the groom took the bride home.

It was during this yearlong period of betrothal that Mary had to get word to Joseph that she was pregnant. Can you imagine how difficult that conversation was? Did she tell him herself? Did she try to explain the part about the Holy Ghost conceiving this child in her womb and how she was favored of the Lord? Was Joseph scandalized? We don't know. All we know is that Joseph was "a just man"<sup>9</sup> and didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So he planned to simply dissolve the marriage quietly and leave this disappointment. But he must have been troubled. So when Mary's life was interrupted by God, Joseph's life was not the same, and the easiest thing to do was to walk away from the interruption.

Some of us here today are like Mary, and some are like Joseph. In the year ahead, some of you, like Mary, will directly experience an interruption from God, and others of you, like Joseph, will not be the same as a result of an interruption to someone else. Maybe it will be your parent or spouse or child or close friend whose life is interrupted. Maybe the news you hear will be something awful like a disease, a lost job, divorce, or even the death of someone you need in your life. When you discover this is happening to someone you love, you first

do everything you can do to prevent it. But the time will come when you discover that you can't change it. Then, like Joseph, you face a great choice. Because you are disappointed or hurt, even if you are "a just" person, you will be tempted to walk away quietly from this person whose life is out of control.

According to Matthew's Gospel, Joseph had to listen to an angel himself to realize that he couldn't put distance between himself and Mary's interrupted life:

*But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.<sup>10</sup>*

He was to take her in, embrace her interrupted life, and keep her as his wife. And that wasn't the end of it. You know, when a baby is born shortly after a wedding, everyone starts counting. People probably assumed that since Joseph didn't "put her away,"<sup>11</sup> the baby was his. That means that Joseph was called to share in the scandal. But it didn't stop there. Joseph probably lived with his parents. So in bringing the pregnant Mary to his home, Joseph had some hard conversations of his own. And then his family had to explain it to the extended family and friends. Thus the interruption traveled from Mary to Joseph to the extended family to the whole village of Nazareth.

As you come to accept God's interruptions in the lives of those you love, it is a small step to see how related you are to the interruptions of those you don't even know. The violence in the Middle East and Iraq is not unrelated to you. Neither is the suffering of those dying of AIDS in Africa or of the homeless mothers who spent last night in cars with their children. The advent of the Savior means we can't distance ourselves from any of these scandals. Like Joseph, we will hear the angels of God telling us to take in these great scandals of the world, bring them home, pray for their needs, and give generously to their relief. Once a Savior is born in the world, you can't cradle Him to your breast without discovering that He is dragging the whole world into your heart as well.

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Reading Mary and child

Kentucky

So let us not get too sentimental about what is happening in the manger at our Christmas celebrations. The reason Christ was born among us was to change the world. The reason His arrival has interrupted your life is to call you to His work so that you may participate in building up the kingdom of God by serving those He would have served. His mission is our mission:

*The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.*<sup>12</sup>

Here's someone else from the Christmas story to show how the timing of God's interruptions leaves something to be desired. Elisabeth, Mary's cousin, was not a young woman when she conceived a child. Try to imagine what her dream had been—to have a child. It's not the pregnancy so much as the baby that is the dream: the holding and nursing and nuzzling—the intimacy in mothering a child. And what happened to that dream? It was entirely barren—for years. Zacharias most likely died in John's infancy, so there was no father; Jesus later made reference to a Zacharias, whom scribes and Pharisees "slew between the temple and the altar."<sup>13</sup> We are told that John "grew [up] in the deserts,"<sup>14</sup> which doesn't sound like Elisabeth's comfortable home in Hebron; she might have died early on as well, entrusting John to someone else. So here is Elisabeth when her life is interrupted by God: after years and years of praying for a child, after becoming used to not having a child, and after getting to the age when giving birth to a child is not a good idea, she finds herself pregnant.

I had my first child when I was 31 and my last child when I was almost 40. I have four children and loved that time when they were little, and I would have had more children, but it didn't happen. However, I clung to my maternity clothes, and I looked with envy on every pregnant woman I saw. That is, until I was approaching 50 and caught myself watching a woman, heavy with child, walk down the stairs in the moot courtroom. She was very large and looked very uncomfortable, and I found myself thinking, "Boy! Am I glad I'm not pregnant!" I realized that having a baby at

that point would really throw a wrench into my life and completely dishevel my precious status quo. I'm glad there's a time and season for most things—but not in this story.

Contrast Elisabeth to Mary, a young woman. Mary too dreamed of motherhood someday in the future, when it would be appropriate. But not before she was married. So we meet two women who are pregnant. One of them is old to be a mother, and the other is young. But both are in the hands of God and have had something earth-shattering conceived in their lives.

"And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; . . . and saluted Elisabeth,"<sup>15</sup> who "hath . . . conceived a son in her old age."<sup>16</sup> The first believers brought together by the presence of Christ were two pregnant women. Isn't it interesting that when God intervenes with the single-most influential breakthrough in history that the human witnesses are two women who are pregnant?

Sometimes, as with Elisabeth, God seems to move too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, He seems to move too quickly. Maybe you feel a kinship with Elisabeth. You've been praying for a long time for something to happen. You think now that it may never happen. Obviously, you can't make it happen, because if you could have, you would have. Clearly, you are not in control. Or maybe you feel closer to Mary, in that your life is completely disheveled this year. God has conceived something in your life that you didn't ask for, that doesn't make sense, and that frightens and confuses you. Clearly, you are not in control either.

When God interrupts our lives, it is to conceive something that will bring us a new kind of life—ironically, a life King Benjamin described as becoming like "a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."<sup>17</sup>

Pregnancy is a great example of having to submit to the forces creating the baby. The mother is not the architect and not in charge. I consider myself a good negotiator. I decided to have my first child a few weeks early, like my mother did, and planned and organized for it. It didn't happen. The due date came and went, but nothing happened. I began thinking what I thought

were powerful and influencing thoughts and taking long walks and climbing up lots of stairs. Nothing happened. I finally ended up being induced and having a C-section. My next baby came a week early, almost in the middle of a dinner party. We must be willing to submit.

That is exactly what can happen when a miracle begins to develop with any of us through God's interruptions. Just as cells miraculously divide to create organs, flesh, and bones, so does the Spirit of God work within to create something new. If we are willing to submit in patience and humility, it will be well with us.

The new life from this interruption may give us a mission or calling that scares us. It may give us gifts, passions, or a dream that we never expected to have. It may take loved ones away that we would rather keep or give us new loved ones we would rather not have. Don't be surprised if you don't understand it. We are not in charge.

So, central to the Christmas message is the discovery that all our lives are interrupted by the birth of Jesus Christ and that God has conceived something terrible and wonderful in our lives.

#### ART CREDITS

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#### NOTES

- 1 Hebrews 10:31.
- 2 Luke 1:28.
- 3 Luke 1:29.
- 4 Luke 1:30–31.
- 5 Luke 1:34.
- 6 Luke 1:35.
- 7 Luke 1:38.
- 8 Luke 1:37.
- 9 Matthew 1:19.
- 10 Matthew 1:20.
- 11 Matthew 1:19.
- 12 Isaiah 61:1.
- 13 Matthew 23:35.
- 14 Luke 1:80.
- 15 Luke 1:39–40.
- 16 Luke 1:36.
- 17 Mosiah 3:19.