

First Christmas Stories 2nd Sunday of Advent: Mary & Joseph

Jesus is the subject every time we preach, teach, or worship. If we are looking at the Old Testament prophets, Paul's letters or a topic in the Bible, Jesus is the subject, he is the lens through which we look at all of these things. It's just more obvious during the Christmas season, which we call Advent.

This series is called First **Christmas Stories**. We are looking through the eyes of the people who were there. They each are telling the story from their point of view or perspective. **It isn't their story, it is Jesus' story.** It's not Elizabeth's story, starring Elizabeth, with Jesus in it. It's not Joseph's story, starring Joseph, including Jesus.

Before you start cheering in December 2021, it is not your story, starring you, including Jesus. It is still Jesus' story, starring Jesus, including you.

Today we look at Jesus' birth through **Joseph and Mary**. How did they see the coming of the Messiah for their very close view? **What were their roles in Jesus' story** of coming as Messiah, King, and Savior?

¹⁸ This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was **a righteous man** and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: ²³ "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, **he did as the angel of the Lord commanded** and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25

(Joseph Video)

What does the view of Jesus' step dad look like? The Christmas Story according to Joseph goes like this...

My view is from the background...sometimes you see better from the background.

As a part of seeing Jesus' birth according to Joseph, it gives me an **opportunity to display one of my hidden passions and expertise**. I have a real passion for ancient artwork that depicts Jesus' birth. I'm kind of an art history nerd. **I have spent literally minutes** on the internet looking through all of the paintings depicting the birth of Jesus. I have driven by many art museums.

As you other art experts know, art imitates life and it gives us a way of seeing how someone views life.

Joseph being in the background is something captured by many artists. One of my new favorite artists of the 1400's is Hugo Van Der Goes. His fans call him HVDG. Sees Jesus' birth this way. **Pic of Hugo van der Goes, Portinari Altarpiece (c.1475)**

Remember if you want to be a super cool art aficionado like myself, put your hand on your chin and say, **"that's an interesting use of space."** You'll fit right in.

HVDG has Joseph **off to the side, in the margins**, kneeling, praying. He isn't in the center of the picture. And I think **Joseph was perfectly ok with that**. You see, being off to the side gives you the ability to really take it all in. **He is there to help Mary**. Off to the side you can see all of what Mary did in giving birth. **You can quietly picture what life will be like for this miracle baby**, who also happens to be God. **In the background you don't get everyone's attention**. You just watch and praise God for what you are seeing. **You didn't really do anything, or at least that's the way it feels**. You simply didn't get in the way of what God was doing. You said, **"yes, I'll come along for the ride and yes, I want to. Mary can be the star, that's ok."**

Here's another new favorite of mine. **Pic of Grunewald Concert of Angels Nativity**

In this painting, **Joseph has been replaced by an angelic orchestra**. Obviously there were no photographers there, but I'm pretty certain that Joseph was there. **He was helping Mary work on her breathing** and giving her **ice chips**. Well, that's what I did. Come to think of it **she really couldn't yell at Joseph**, because he wasn't the one that put her in this position.

The negative side to being in the background is that you can become easily **disconnected and passive**. "Not my son. If he's who the angel said he is, then I'm not really necessary. This is **not my responsibility**."

Obviously, Joseph didn't take that path. He did say, **This is not about me**. **This is about what God is doing, through Mary**.

It's a story about Jesus, starring Jesus, with Joseph in it. He should be in the picture, if only somewhat in the background.

This is the main problem us human beings have. We are conditioned, by our broken sinful world and our own sin, to think that it is about me. **Jesus came for me**. Yes, he did, but because he came for all of us. **We loved to say the phrase, "Jesus as your own personal savior."** Yes, it's personal because I'm a person who is being saved from being disconnected from my creator in this world and separated from him in eternity because of Jesus. But the story still isn't about me. **Jesus didn't come so he and I could have this very personal, private thing** where we have a secret **handshake** and no one else can relate.

In the American church, we have encouraged and nurtured this private personal thing that places God and his church as the ones who provide individuals with what they need to live a good life here on earth and eternal life in his presence in the next. That means we are here to receive what has been produced and then provided for us. So the story is simply about me getting what God has for me. That means it's the story about me, starring me, with just enough Jesus to save me from destruction.

This is why we ask these three questions at every bridge group meeting.

1. God how can you be so good?
2. How am I doing loving others? Or what does love look like today?
3. What is God speaking to me today?

Those three questions put our focus first on Jesus because it is a story about Jesus, starring Jesus. And then on the **object of Jesus' love for others**, who he wants to use us to love them. And then it is **back on God and what he is trying to say to me**.

The worst thing we can do at the beginning of Jesus' story, is to make it about me and what he can do for me. That is to **completely miss the point**. And Joseph, I believe, understood that.

But, once that baby wakes and starts crying and he sees that 16-year-old girl holding and feeding that baby and then looks out the stable at a dark scary world, he knows. Yes, I'm in the background, but I

certainly can't remain there as a passive onlooker. **This baby, this young mom, needs me because God told me to marry her and, therefore, these two are my responsibility.**

Yes, the Christmas story according to Joseph goes like this...I'm viewing God's story from the background, it's not about me, **But, God chose me for a part in this.**

This Christmas story should be less about what Jesus did, coming as a baby, and more about our response to God coming to us into our world.

My response isn't simply to believe that it is true, with the idea that this will get me into heaven. It is to join this on-going story that began at creation, came to life through Jesus, Immanuel. This story of God coming to us is still being written and you have been offered a part in it.

Yes, an uneducated, poor insignificant man named Joseph was offered a part in the story. Yes, you with all your sin, faults, and brokenness have been offered a part. Do you want to play it or write your own?

What if everything we did was done with an eye to playing a part in Jesus' story? Gift giving, family meals, shopping, parties, decorating. It isn't about making our own story.

This is what has been traditionally called Mary's Magnificat, or hymn. This is her response to her meeting with Elizabeth, when John the Baptist leaps in his mother's womb when Mary approaches. Elizabeth says this to Mary. "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. 43 Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? 44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

⁴⁶ Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. ⁴⁷ How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! ⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. ⁵⁰ He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. ⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. ⁵² He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. ⁵⁵ For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever." Luke 1:46-55

(Mary Video)

The Christmas story according to Mary goes like this...
It's a hard being in the spotlight

Of all of the nativity scenes painted in the mid 1600's, this one by Nicholas Poussin is my favorite. *Pic of Nicholas Poussin, Nativité (c.1653)*

Who has the spotlight? It's Mary with Joseph close, but still in the shadows. I'm not sure, but in most of these, **Mary looks very white**, particularly in this one. And she has giant hands.

Here is a young woman, probably 16 years old or younger, who is now the center of attention. She is the one carrying the Son of God inside her. She is the one who has to hear the **snickers and snide remarks** and people not wanting their kids to hang around her. Now she is the one who **must give birth without any of the women in her family** there to coach her through it. And the one who is probably helping her is the **man who is marrying her, but has never been intimate with her.** Talk about a spotlight, she can't get away from it.

Mary had to be willing to embrace this role of being on display for all to see. She can't hide in a corner.

Sometimes God puts us in the center of the spotlight, not for our glory, but for his. Sometimes God puts us in the center of the spotlight and we are under **great scrutiny, open to criticism and misunderstanding.** Mary didn't run from this, she leaned into it.

When I was young in this role, I didn't want to make hard or risky decisions. I'm a thinker. I didn't want to change, but rather do what I was doing better, hoping to get a better result. **I had to cut staff positions.** I didn't do it until we had such a budget shortfall that I had no choice.

The same people are taking more responsibility for what we all receive. It might be your time to come out of the shadows and take on your part in what God is doing.

Sometimes its "tag you're it." For such a time as this, you are the one. You can have the **"No I'm too...response."** No, I'm too...young, old, poor, inexperienced, uneducated, lacking in Bible knowledge, busy...

Mary was too young, inexperienced, poor, powerless, and female. She should have been the last person to bring the messiah into the world. **And**

that's why she was perfect. She had nothing Jesus could prop himself up on that mom gave him. She simply loved him.

The Christmas story, according to Mary, goes like this...It's hard being in the spotlight, **Particularly when I'm completely powerless.**

Mary didn't tell the angel that she needed to study the scriptures more, get a little older and more experienced, get a good job to help provide for a king in the matter proper for his standing, try to make some connections through Zechariah and Elizabeth around the temple...

We think we need to get power so that God can use us. This is the gateway to pride and arrogance.

What we should have done before opening the Beaverton campus was **study multi site strategies for three years**, travel all of the country. We should have **raised 300,000 dollars** in order to renovate the building, pay for staff. **We should put a ton of resources into growing to 400-500 people** so that we can send 100 and it won't really affect the main campus. By that time, we would have figured out how to do it without much discomfort at all.

We don't handle power very well. God likes to do his best work in the margins, through powerless people who trust him and say, "yes". Power corrupts.

These words by Paul could have been written with Mary in mind. **⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** 2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Even to the end of the story, Mary is powerless to save her son from death on a cross. But if she had the power to do that, then the means of our salvation would have been subverted. **Jesus used powerlessness to accomplish what no earthly power could have done, the transforming of people's hearts who are bent toward sin and self-destruction.**

We could end there, but we aren't. There's one more thing to look at. **The Christmas Story according to Mary & Joseph goes like this...**

I love the work of **Lorenzo Costa**. I actually have a pair of his sunglasses. Look at how he portrays the nativity. **x**

What do these two share as they tell the story of Jesus? The Christmas Story according to Mary & Joseph goes like this...**Humble unconditional submission to God.**

Here are their responses to God's messengers, telling them what they are being asked to do as their part of Jesus' story. See how they are similar.

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. Matthew 1:24

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. Luke 1:38

They were humble...

They didn't bring conditions to their "yes"...

Their "yes" to God meant "no" to other things that would get in the way...their yes had teeth.

Do you bring your conditions for following God?

- If I don't have to struggle financially
- If I get the career I want
- If I get into the school I want
- If no one dies that I'm counting on
- If there isn't a pandemic

How do we respond to Jesus' story like they did? This story isn't about theory or information. It is a story that demands a response. Do you want to play your part in Jesus' story in this world and the next?

What would Joseph and Mary do?

What am I waiting for before I play my role in Jesus' story? Maybe it's disappointment that has become bitterness. Maybe it's fear of these uncertain times.

If you are weak, then you are perfectly positioned for God to use you. If you are waiting for something to make you more powerful or at least feel more powerful, then that isn't faith.

Example...starting Beaverton during a pandemic when people are leaving the church and no money.

Husbands and Wives, how is your relationship telling the story? This is perfect if you are engaged. Ask this question and talk about how the way

you relate together, treat one another, relate in our culture, tells the story of a God who came to us and sacrificed for us when we weren't deserving.