

Mary — What Should I Do When God Changes My Plans?

December 7, 2014

Newsflash! Christmas was hijacked! I am not talking about the politically correct groups that are trying to remove the phrase “Merry Christmas” from our vocabularies and replace it with “Happy Holidays”. I am saying Christmas was hijacked and taken from the church. Christmas is now so romanticized that most of us don’t know the real Christmas story.

Let me illustrate. I was at a Christian college a few weeks ago that had a beautiful manger scene set up for the students. Unfortunately, there were problems with the manger scene. There was baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They were spotless and middle-aged. Baby Jesus glowed. No night light was necessary in baby Jesus’ room. There were the shepherds standing on one side of the manger. On the other side were three wise men, all wearing color-coordinated outfits and carrying a gift. In the background were decorated camels.

Newsflash! That is not the Christmas story. That is tradition and romanticism that crept into the church. I want to begin by showing you four ways we distort the Christmas story in the church.

1. **The wise men were not at the manger.** They did not come until later, maybe as much as two years later. According to Matthew 2:11 they came to see the child in the house, not the baby in the manger.
2. **The wise men were not dressed in color-coordinating robes.** The word wise men comes from the word *magi*. We get our word magician from it.

They were trained in astrology and astronomy. Historically they come from Babylon and most likely trace their knowledge of the Christ child back to Daniel who at one time was the chief of the magicians and astrologers in Babylon. They probably looked more like a traditional wizard and wore long robes with coned hats more than what we see at the traditional nativity scene.

3. **The wise men were not kings.** If you have heard of the Christmas carol We Three Kings, you know it starts off with this line “We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar....” That is a Christmas fail blog in the church. They were not kings.
4. **The Bible never says there were three wise men.** It only says they brought three gifts.

This morning we will continue peeling away distortions of the Christmas story as we return to our study of the birth of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke.

Our theme for the series comes from Luke 2:15-17.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. Luke 2:15–17 (ESV)

We have a two part goal. We want to:

1. **See** what really happened on that first Christmas by studying the first two chapters of Luke.
2. **Tell** our friends and community the Christmas story, just like the shepherds did that first Christmas.

We are using our advent prayer cards to remind us to pray for three people in our lives that need to know the good news of the Christmas story and to invite them to church to hear it.

Last week, when we left our study of the Christmas story, the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah during this Super Bowl moment in the temple while he was offering incense to God. Gabriel told Zechariah that his elderly barren wife would become pregnant. They would have a son. They were to name him John. He was going to be a great prophet who would prepare the way for the Christ.

Even though Zechariah knew his Bible and loved God, he was spiritually stiff. While he knew God in his head, *he didn't believe God would keep his promise*. Rather than an angelic appearance serving as enough proof, he wanted an addition sign to prove God would keep his word. God granted it to him. He was given a sign he would never forget. He would be deaf and mute until John was born.

Things worked out swell for his elderly wife Elizabeth. God was good on his word. She became pregnant in her old age. Maybe the best part was since Zechariah was deaf and mute he could no longer say, "No" when she asked to use the credit card. She was a happy woman.

This morning, the scene shifts from Jerusalem and an elderly priest desperate for a child to a dumpy rural town with a young teenage girl not expecting a child.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at

the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26–38 (ESV)

Let’s walk our way through the story, make some observations along the way and draw a life lesson at the end.

Nazareth

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth... Luke 1:26 (ESV)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Gabriel was sent on another errand. This time he was sent to Nazareth. That doesn’t sound noteworthy. Today Nazareth is a large bustling town no different from others in Israel. In the days of Jesus, Nazareth was nothing. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the apocrypha or Talmud. Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian who wrote at least 29 books chronicling history from the time of Jesus doesn’t mention Nazareth once. Nothing happened there. Nobody of importance came from Nazareth. Scholars estimate that at the time of Jesus no more than 200 to 500 people could have lived in the tiny city. There was only one well for the entire village.



Archaeologists tell us homes in the village were only 500 to 700 square feet. That is 22 feet by 22 feet. The homes were heated with wood. The main business in Nazareth was growing olives and grapes on the nearby hillside. Nazareth was inhabited by the destitute and poor. It was a city full of nobodies going nowhere. Jesus grew up in that dirt-poor forgotten town.

While Nazareth was nothing, it was three miles south of a major city named Sepphoris. Travelers used Nazareth like a gas stop. It was a place to get a Red Bull and a donut while topping off your camels when heading out of town.

Sepphoris was a royal city and the center of Roman domination for the area. It was filled with merchants, traders and government officials. Herod Antipas had a number of large-scale building projects in Sepphoris during the time of Jesus. It is likely that Joseph and Jesus commuted to Sepphoris to work as carpenters in those building projects. Just like today, if you were too poor to live in the city, you lived outside of the city and commuted to work.



Cities develop reputations. New York is known as the city that never sleeps. Chicago is known as the windy city. Las Vegas is known as sin city. What do you think was Nazareth's reputation?

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? John 1:46 (ESV)

Nazareth had a bad reputation. It was not just small and poor but apparently it was a little like Las Vegas, sin city. Nothing good came from Nazareth, yet this is where God chose for his son to be born.

For the rest of his life, Jesus would be known as Jesus of Nazareth. That is like Jesus of Vegas. This is encouraging. God looked around to decide where his son would be born. He didn't choose a beautiful city like Jerusalem or Rome. He chose an out-of-the-way hick, rural town with a terrible reputation that would forever be associated with the name of his precious son.

Doesn't this tell us a lot about God? God loves small towns that nobody else notices. He loves simple places and simple people like you and me. I find that incredibly encouraging. He loves saving people of absolutely no significance in this world.

Our story continues.

...to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:27 (ESV)

We learned about Nazareth, our location, now let's meet our characters.

Mary

Mary was probably illiterate. Few women were given a formal education in the ancient world, especially in a poor rural town. Her only connection to God would be listening to God's Word read in the synagogue. What I find impressive is she took following God seriously. She apparently paid attention in church and wasn't texting her friends and chatting in the back row when God's Word was read and the priest explained it.

She was probably young. She may have been as young as 12, or as old as 14. Today we don't trust a 12-year-old girl with a cell phone. God saw her differently. He trusted her with the life of his own son.

This teaches us about the myth of adolescence. In junior high, senior high and sometimes even into college, kids are told their job is to just attend church. The fun is the games at youth group. Learning in church, loving God and doing something significant with your life is for adults. Adolescents are along for the ride.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Mary was going to conceive and birth the Son of God as a junior high student. Teenagers, don't buy the myth of adolescence. God's plans involve you being used right now, where you are as a student. God can use you in a big way right now. Young adults, don't let people tell you that because you are still in school God can't use you or won't use you or that real life starts after school. That is a myth. I am convinced God loves to put his hand on young men and women and use them for him in a big way even when they are in junior high, just like Mary.

Joseph

Who was Joseph? Joseph was probably a teenage boy between the ages of 16 to 19. He was poor. He was a blue collar carpenter. He was of the kingly line of David. He is an ordinary guy working a basic job. I think he is the unsung hero of the Christmas story. He doesn't get Christmas songs written about him. Nobody sings, "Joseph, did you know?"

When he thought Mary was unfaithful to him, he didn't want to shame her but wanted to divorce her quietly. He didn't want to get revenge on a girl he thought cheated. When he was later told in a dream to wed Mary, he obeyed. He went through the rest of his life with people wondering why he married a pregnant woman that was unfaithful to him before their wedding night. Joseph stood by her and protected her and baby Jesus from public shame. He was Mary's support system when nobody could understand. He was an amazing guy, the down-to-earth unsung hero of the Christmas story.

Bethrothal

Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married. Marriage customs in the ancient world were different. The engagement lasted a year. It began with the groom's parents approaching the bride's parents, requesting their daughter's hand in marriage for their son. The groom's parents paid the bride price to the bride's family so the legal transaction of marriage was complete at the engagement. It was witnessed by a rabbi or priest. They served as the ancient version of a public notary.

After the bride price was paid at the engagement, there was a one-year period of engagement which culminated in a wedding party that lasted seven days. They partied much harder at weddings than we do. A husband and wife were legally married once engaged. The only way to break off an engagement was with divorce papers. They were not allowed to live together, sleep together or spend unsupervised time together. They weren't even allowed to text or Snapchat until their wedding night.

Engagement was an exciting time for a young woman in the ancient world just as it is an exciting time for young women today. A young woman had a year to plan her wedding. She dreamed about the man she would marry. Every night was spent planning their life together, planning the wedding and thinking about the dress and her wedding colors. This was Mary. She was the junior high girl that couldn't wait to get married.

Gabriel's message

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 1:28–30 (ESV)

Some of you grew up with translations of these verses where Gabriel said to Mary, "Hail Mary full of grace." Some of you were told that Gabriel was worshipping Mary because she was full of grace or the dispenser of grace. Newsflash! Distorted Christmas story alert. The word "Greetings" simply means "Rejoice". It means "I have good news for you." The good news is that Mary was called the favored one. This simply means God was showing favor to her. He was going to pour his grace on her. Gabriel had good news. God was going to be super gracious to her.

Her reaction is understandable. She was greatly troubled. "Gabriel, you don't know who you are taking too. I think you have the wrong address. I am a nobody who lives in nowhereville called Nazareth. I am 12 years old. They won't even let me drive a camel. You are a mighty angel. I am a little girl. I think you have the wrong person. Why would I find favor with God?"

Gabriel didn't have the wrong girl. Here is the good news he came to deliver.

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Luke 1:31–33 (ESV)

This is packed with meaning. She was going to conceive a son and she was to call him Jesus. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of Joshua and it means *God saves or God is salvation*, which I think is a very appropriate name for Jesus.

Gabriel said the Lord would give him the throne of his father David. In the Old Testament, David was given the kingship over Israel and his sons were to continue reigning as kings over Israel. The problem was David's sons were messed up. In time, they lost the kingdom. The nation was exiled to Babylon. The Jews eventually returned but were now living under the rule of Rome.

There was a problem. God said *a descendent of David would reign as king forever*. The descendants of David failed as kings. Did God break his promise? It is the same struggle Zechariah faced last week. Can God be trusted to keep his word? Look at what the Old Testament tells us about a king of David that will reign forever.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7:12–13 (ESV)

“I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.” Selah Psalm 89:4 (ESV)

Gabriel told Mary that her son was this long-awaited king. He would be a king that would reign forever and his kingdom would last forever.

We don't know how much of this she understood. Like many of the disciples, I think she couldn't put all the pieces together for quite some time. Just remember the announcement. It will make more sense down the road. What we do know is Gabriel told her the child she would conceive would be king forever and his kingdom would last forever. This is a king unlike any other. Now Mary has a question, which I think is quite understandable.

Mary's question

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34 (ESV)

There is a big difference between Mary's question and Zechariah's question. Zechariah's question was, "How can I know this is true?" He doubted God would keep his promise. Mary's question is one of mechanics. "I am a virgin. Virgin teenage girls don't get pregnant. There are no other pregnant virgins in my junior high class. How will this happen? Who is the man? Joseph and I are saving ourselves for marriage and we don't have a wedding until next year. We are engaged so no hanky-panky before the wedding night."

In the Old Testament, God inspired Isaiah to speak about this ahead of time. God's son would be born from a pregnant virgin. Apparently this was not clicking with Mary, which is quite understandable.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (ESV)

Immanuel means God with us. It means God coming to be with man. This was all prophesied by God ahead of time. Nothing is out of control. Here is a lesson we can learn.

It is OK to trust God and still have questions. Zechariah's question showed he didn't trust God to keep his promise. "Give me a sign Gabriel because I don't think God will keep his word." Mary trusted God but didn't understand the mechanics of what she was supposed to do. It is OK to trust God but still have questions about things. If you have questions on the mechanics of how God fit all the animals on Noah's ark that is OK. God only asks you to trust that he got the animals on the ark and that he kept his word. If you have question on how Samson ripped a city gate off its hinges and carried it up a hill, that is a fair question. We believe he did it, but I don't know how his bones didn't break. If you have questions on how God held the water back as the Israelites cross the Red Sea on dry ground, that is OK. God only asks us to trust and believe that he did it. Questions about the mechanics of how God does things, that is OK. Questions that doubt God's character are bad.

Gabriel answered her question on mechanics.

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Luke 1:35–37 (ESV)

"Mary, there will be no man involved." The word overshadow implies God's presence in the holy of holies. That same presence of God in the holy of holies

would come into her womb and be fused with human flesh. The child to be born to her would literally be the Son of God.

By way of encouragement, Gabriel told her that her relative Elizabeth, who was old and barren, was six months pregnant. For nothing is impossible with God.

If you have a Bible, underline the phrase, “Nothing is impossible with God.” This is something the Bible is trying to teach us. God loves to take hopeless people and hopeless circumstances and save them. God loves to do the impossible because it makes his name famous. He loved taking a hopeless Israel that was forced to throw their sons in the Nile River, reversing that hopeless situation and bringing Egypt to its knees with plague after plague as he rescued his people. That seemed impossible. He loved to take people like Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and was languishing in a prison, then in one day bringing him from the dungeon to second in command of Egypt. That seemed impossible. He loves to take ordinary people in hopeless situations like Mary and do the impossible. It is what makes his name famous.

This is important for us to remember. Many of you have given up hope. Maybe you have gone through a divorce and you think there is no hope for the future. Maybe you can’t find a decent job and you are giving up hope of finding one. Maybe your marriage is hard and you are giving up hope that it can be healed. Those are the kinds of situations God loves. Impossible situations. Hopeless situations. Those are the times God loves to ride to the rescue so he makes his name famous in our lives. There is no hope but from God. We learn

nothing is impossible with God. Old women becoming pregnant. A young virgin conceiving God's own son. God taking you and me, his enemies because of sin, and saving us and making us his friends. Nothing is impossible with God.

Mary's response

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38 (ESV)

The main character in the Bible is Jesus. The hero of the story is always Jesus. The Bible tells us that while Bible characters are not the hero of the story, we can learn from them. We can definitely learn from Mary. She was a simple woman with a simple faith who was probably illiterate, with no formal education. All she had was bits and pieces of the Bible that she treasured in her heart which she learned in weekend worship. Look how she took what little she knew and let it guide her to trust God with her life. "OK God, whatever you want me to do with my life, that is what I will do."

So many of us have life charted for ourselves. We want God to bless our plans. We have our scripts. If God shows up and gives us a different script, we will not be happy. Most of us don't like when God changes our plans.

Mary's script said she was going to marry Joseph. It was going to be a great wedding. The dress would fit. They would have lots of children. Everybody would think she was a great wife and mother. The invitations were out. She was planning a huge week-long wedding party. She would be popular around the small town of Nazareth. Gabriel showed up and said, "God has a new script. You will be pregnant before marriage. You will be accused of sleeping around before your wedding night with a man other than your future husband.

Telling your family and friends you are a pregnant virgin won't go over well. They won't believe you."

Mary knew Joseph's heart would be broken. He would probably divorce her because he wouldn't believe her claim of angelic visitation. Mary was willing to trust God's new script for her life, even if it meant she may never marry Joseph, the man she loved.

How many young ladies that are putting together their weddings, sending out invitations and trying on dresses would be OK with God showing up and telling them they don't get to marry the love of their lives? How many of you would be willing to say, "God, it is OK with me if you want to ruin my plans for my life. I trust you." Imagine the shame and mocking Mary would have faced and nobody would believe she was a virgin.

There was a provision in the law that allows those in authority to make an example of an adulterous woman. They could dress the woman in rags, abuse her verbally and physically then tie her up in the center of town for everyone else to see and mock. It was total public humiliation that was intended to discourage other women from considering fornication or adultery. Mary knew that was a possibility. She said, "God, I am OK with that. If those are your plans for my life. I am willing to accept them and follow them. I am willing to lose Joseph and my reputation."

For the rest of her life people thought of her as a tramp. One of the mocking comments the Pharisees used to say to Jesus was, "At least we know

who our father is.¹” Even as an adult, nobody forgot Mary conceived Jesus out of wedlock.

Mary was willing to let go of her reputation and her marriage if that was the way God wanted her to serve him with her life. She had a simple faith that was willing to place complete trust in God when he showed up and changed her plans for her life. That is something we can learn.

We see this same simple complete trust in God not just in the life of Mary but also in her son Jesus when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane before he went to the cross.

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”
Matthew 26:39 (ESV)

This is our challenge. How do we respond when God changes our plans? I thought I would be happily married and have kids and a great family. God showed up and said, “Different script.” I thought I would make lots of money and live comfortably. God showed up and said, “Different script.” Just as God changed the script for Mary, he will show up and change the scripts we have for our lives. When he does, we have to trust him and follow him. It is easy to gripe. It is easy to argue. It is natural to whine. God wants us to say, “OK God, I am your servant. Whatever you want is good with me.”

Mary’s simple trust in God when he changed the script of her life is something we can learn from. We began with ways the Christmas story gets

¹ John 8:41, Mark 6:3

distorted. We will finish with ways Mary's story gets distorted. Most of these distortions come from the Catholic or Orthodox Church.

How do we distort Mary's story?

1. **Mary's mother was not a virgin.** The Roman Catholics claim that Mary did not just give birth to Jesus as a virgin but that her mother was also a virgin. That is not true. In the next chapter we see Mary goes to the temple to make a sacrifice for her sin. Mary is a sinner just like you and me.
2. **Mary was not a perpetual virgin.** Some also say that Mary was a perpetual virgin and who never had intimacy with Joseph. If that was true, I am sure Joseph was majorly bummed. The Bible tells us Jesus had brothers and sisters and that Mary and Joseph had a normal marital relationship after the birth of Jesus.² Jesus' half-brothers didn't believe he was God until he rose from the dead to prove it. We know two of them became leaders in the church and even wrote books of the Bible. The book of James was written by Jesus' half brother James. The book of Jude was written by Jesus' half brother Jude. If Jesus' brothers were believing he is God and praying to him, you know something serious is going on.
3. **Mary cannot save you.** In recent years the pope said Mary is a co-mediator or co-redeemer with Jesus. That simply is not true. The Bible says there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Mary doesn't connect us to God. Jesus connects us to God. This is why we see Mary worshipping Jesus in the early chapters of Acts.

² Mark 6:3

4. **Mary cannot answer your prayers.** Some people actually pray to Mary. It goes something like this.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen

We should never pray to Mary. She is not the dispenser of grace. Jesus is the dispenser of grace. Mary doesn't give grace from Jesus. Mary was in need of grace from Jesus, just as we are. Don't make too much of .

5. **Mary's story must be true.** There was a young pastor a few years ago in Michigan who that wrote a book where he claimed the virgin birth of Jesus was taken from pagan mythology. Maybe Jesus' mother slept around and she doesn't remember who impregnated her. He said, "That wouldn't be a big loss." I respectfully disagree. If Jesus wasn't born of Mary when she was a virgin, that would mean the Bible was lying about Mary and Jesus was lying about his origins. It would mean Luke's careful investigation in this book was completely untrustworthy. That would mess up the story significantly because we wouldn't have a sinless man who can take on our sin and die on the cross. It would be a real problem. Don't make too little of Mary.

Mary is a great example for us to learn from. Some day God will show up in our lives and give us a different script than we expected. How will we handle it? Will we whine? Argue? Complain? Will we learn from the example of Mary and see ourselves as no more than God's servant and humbly accept God's plan for our lives?

Please stand as I close in prayer.



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