

A Strange Thing Happened on the Way to Bethlehem #3

“A JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME”

Isaiah 9:2-7, Micah 5:2-4, Luke 2:1-7

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“Eileen Egan, who worked with Mother Teresa and with the Missionaries of Charity for thirty years, described Mother Teresa’s outlook like this:

“One day, after my conversation had been filled with a litany of problems, Mother Teresa remarked, ‘Everything is a *Problem*. Why not use the word *Gift*?’ With that began a shift in vocabulary. Shortly thereafter, we were to fly from Vancouver to New York City. I was dismayed to learn that the trip had to be broken en route, with a long delay, and was about to inform her of the *problem*. Then I caught myself and said, ‘Mother, I have to tell you about a gift. We have to wait four hours here, and you won’t arrive at the convent until very late.’ Mother Teresa settled down in the airport to read a book of meditations, a favorite of hers.

“From that time on, items that presented disappointments or difficulties would be introduced with ‘We have a small gift here,’ or ‘Today we have an especially big gift.’”¹

It’s so easy to become consumed by the problems of life that we miss out on the gifts that God is presenting to us. The trials and troubles in our lives are opportunities to see how God can work things out to bring about His blessings to our lives. Each problem is a chance to once more put our trust and faith in the Lord, relying on His provision and guidance. When we put our trust in the Lord, He provides solutions to the “problems” so that those problems become gifts.

Take for example our Old Testament lesson of Isaiah. In the later verses of chapter 8, Isaiah describes the condition that people get in when they no longer turn to the Lord God for their source of wisdom and knowledge. Isaiah tells the people, “*When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the*

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 745)

land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness” (Is. 8:19-22).

Now, that’s a problem we see happening even today, where wisdom and knowledge and insight and guidance are sought from everywhere EXCEPT the Lord God Almighty. And the result is utter darkness of the soul, and people are raging against their leaders and against God as they curse them because of this deep darkness.

But God has turned this problem into a gift for all who will turn to Him. We heard it in our reading of Isaiah 9, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You (Lord) have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest...For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end”* (Is. 9:2-3, 6-7).

God has provided a gift to all who will turn to Him in the midst of this deep darkness - the Light of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the greatest gift given to us, since He is the one who provides forgiveness of our sins and release from the wickedness and evils of this world. What was once a “problem” has now become a gift that we can be blessed by as we turn to Jesus as our Messiah, and seek His guidance and direction for all the other problems in our lives. As we consider our “problems” gifts instead, we can see that God brings about something good out of the hardships and difficulties that we endure, for all those who turn to Him and trust in Him.

But this is difficult to do in a society that rejects God’s presence and forgoes anything to do with the Lord Jesus Christ. So we who are followers of Jesus need to begin to live in such a way that the light of Jesus shines through us so that it affects the world around us so that they might see that there is another option to our problems - the gifts of the Lord.

Mary and Joseph were confronted by a variety of problems that God began turning into gifts instead. Every time they were confronted with another situation, they both relied upon their faith in the Lord God to guide them into the gift that was being presented to them. And such is the case in our Gospel lesson today of Luke 2:1-7. Listen to what happened. (READ Luke 2:1-7)

Just when they thought that it couldn't get any worse, just when they were probably getting increased negative responses to Mary's pregnancy and Joseph's continued betrothal plans from the people of Nazareth, along comes another gift to Joseph and Mary. Caesar Augustus decided that there was not enough money coming into the government, so he calls for a census of the people so that they might be taxed even more than they already were. Luke attempts to put an accurate date to Jesus' birth as he says this census "*took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria*" (Luke 2:2), commonly dated between 6 BC - 4 AD. This decree would have made an excuse for both Mary and Joseph to leave the hostile surroundings of Nazareth to begin again in another town.

Now, the census required everyone to return to their ancestral hometown to register for the new tax. Both Mary and Joseph were of the house of David, so that meant that they were to return to their hometown of Bethlehem. But that was a problem, because Mary was well into her pregnancy with Jesus, and the census meant that they would have to travel around 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register there.

Now this was not just a "get in the car and drive an hour" to get there journey. They would have had to walk all the way there, possibly with Mary riding a donkey for her convenience. It's hard for us to visualize or understand what a trip like that would involve. When's the last time you took a walk, or even a bike ride, that went 70 miles?

And the conditions weren't like going along the shoreline of Lake Michigan from Sheboygan to Oak Creek, WI. There were some very rugged conditions, with mountains, and rivers, and enemy territory, and bandits to contend with. And there were no Royal Hilton hotels or even Motel 6's anywhere along the way to stay overnight. They would use the "roads" that were available, but they

weren't 4 lane highways, or even dirt roads that we are used to - they were more like walking paths from one community to another. So Joseph and Mary may have been on the road for a week or more, roughing it along the way, getting provisions where they could, possibly sharing fire from other travelers, and sleeping out in the open. It would have been a slow journey.

I laugh when people tell me that they would like to be able to go back in time and visit the time of Jesus. I usually tell them that they wouldn't last more than a week. We are so spoiled by all of our modern infrastructures and common amenities today. It was so different back then that we just don't have a clue what it was like unless we spend any length of time in the outback or wilderness, away from modern society. And they didn't even have decent shoes to wear - no Adidas walkers or Nike tennis shoes, no Gore-Tex hiking boots - just a piece of leather strapped to the sole of your foot. And to be in the ninth month of pregnancy making such a trek? That's not a trip that I would want to make.

So it could have been easy for Mary and Joseph to focus on that huge problem, and even say, tongue and cheek of course, "What a gift from God!" But it was what they had to do, so they did it, trusting that God would supply them with all they needed, keeping them safe, and bringing them to the right place for the census. Joseph was taking care of Mary and the Son of God, Jesus.

But the reason they had to travel to Bethlehem was not merely because of the census, though Augustus had made that proclamation. All of the prophecies of the coming Messiah told of the Messiah being from Bethlehem, David's town. Micah 5:2 tells us of the Messiah coming from Bethlehem Ephrathah, that is the city of Bethlehem in the region of Ephrath (near Jerusalem). God was dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's with regard to the promises of His Savior. Without knowing it, Mary and Joseph's "gift" was bringing about the fulfillment of Scripture, difficult as it was. At that point it was up to Joseph and Mary to see the situation as either a problem, or as a gift.

"In his book, *A Turtle on a Fencepost*, Allan Emery tells of accompanying businessman, Ken Hansen, to visit a hospitalized employee. The patient lay very still, his eyes conveying anguish. His operation had taken eight hours, and recovery was long and uncertain.

“Alex,’ Ken said quietly, ‘you know I have had a number of serious operations. I know the pain of trying to talk. I think I know what questions you’re asking. There are two verses I want to give you - Genesis 42:36 and Romans 8:28. We have the option of these two attitudes. We need the perspective of the latter.’

“Hansen turned to the passages, read them, then prayed and left. The young man, Alex Balc, took the message to heart. He later enjoyed full recovery.

“Every day we choose one of these attitudes amid life’s difficulties - to be beat-up, or to be up-beat. It is ours to say with Jacob in Genesis 42:36: ‘*All these things are against me.*’ Or to say with Paul in Romans 8:28: ‘*All these things are working together for good to those who love the Lord...*’”²

Having the attitude of all things working together for good grants us a resolve within us that God knows what is best for us and that He will always be there with us as we come upon His gifts of challenging situations.

But there were other surprise gifts along the way for Mary and Joseph. Not only did they have to endure the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but because of the census, Bethlehem would have been bursting at the seams with all of the people in the line of David coming home to register for it. It was quite possible that Mary and Joseph had relatives still in Bethlehem when they arrived, but they would have had competition as to where to find housing during the time they would be there. Those residing in Bethlehem may have already accommodated other family members, so the only place that Joseph could find that was out of the elements somewhat, was an animal shelter of some sort. It may have been a cave or a shed or even the back of someone’s house, since it was common for homes to have shelters attached to them where the animals would have resided, along with their stored up food and their feeding troughs.

The New International Bible states that “*there was no guest room available for them*” (Luke 2:7), and that makes more sense to me, even though places like “*inns*” were probably full to the max as well.

² (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, pg. 743)

With Mary being so close to giving birth, they would have needed some privacy, and the “stable” may have been the next best available thing for them. In any case, the time comes for Mary to give birth, and after wrapping Him in strips of cloths, Joseph uses a manger, a feeding trough, as a bed for the newborn Child.

Again, the gift established the fact that Mary and Joseph were from the lower economic side of the scale. They simply used what was available to provide a place for Jesus to be born. It was the case of a simple carpenter and his betrothed wife, rejoicing over the miracle of the birth of the Son of God. To some it would have been the worst nightmare they could think of. For others, it is the fulfillment of God’s promises of providing His Messiah, born to be a servant for the world so that the world might come back into a relationship with the Lord God Almighty. It all depends upon which perspective we have: all things are against me, or all things work together for good to them who love the Lord.

So how can we be about turning problems into gifts? What will it take for us to see difficult situations and then with the perspective of “all things working together for good to those who love the Lord,” seek God’s guidance to bring about a gift in the midst of that problem? Just keeping our eyes on the problem will not solve the situation. But trusting in what the Lord could do through us in the midst of that challenging situation can bring us into following God’s direction to something glorious. Let me give you another example of what I’m talking about.

“In 1939, William Sangster assumed leadership of Westminster Central Hall, a Methodist church near London’s Westminster Abbey. During his first worship service he announced to his stunned congregation that Britain and Germany were officially at war. He quickly converted the church basement into an air raid shelter and for the next 1,688 nights Sangster ministered to the various needs of all kinds of people. At the same time, he somehow managed to write, to preach gripping sermons, to earn a Ph.D., and to lead hundreds to Christ. He became known as Wesley’s successor in London and was esteemed as the most beloved British preacher of his era.

“Sometime after the war, Sangster was diagnosed with progressive muscular atrophy. For three

years, he slowly died, becoming progressively more paralyzed, finally able to move only two fingers. But his attitude didn't falter, for when first learning of his illness, Sangster made four rules for himself. Many people have rules for living. Sangster composed four rules for dying: 'I will never complain. I will keep the home bright. I will count my blessings. I will try to turn it to gain.' He did all those things. And thus the work of God was displayed in his life, and in his death."³

We are never promised a life without problems, but if we can receive those problems as gifts, then our perspective changes from a negative one to a positive one, being able to see how God desires us to achieve His full plan of Salvation for the whole world.

Joseph and Mary certainly could have focused on the problems they faced while being chosen to bring about the miracle of Jesus' birth. But they chose to look at each problem as an opportunity to live in the blessing of God's gift to them. Though they may have wondered about each condition they faced, they constantly turned to the Lord for His help and guidance. And then, they could rejoice when Jesus was born. Not that His birth would bring an end to the difficulties they would face, but to be able to see that God's great work of Salvation provided through them was the gift in the midst of the struggles.

So as we look at all of the things in our own lives that we see as problems, we have a decision to make: to view them as them all being against us in order to destroy us, or to see the possibilities that God can do in the midst of that hardship, and seek His guidance in order to make the gift become a reality.

One more example. "There was a wealthy man who, in his old age, was asked to recall the happiest experience of his life. He said, 'It was when I was in a hospital in a strange town, seriously ill for three weeks with typhoid fever.'

"When his listeners expressed surprise that this was the happiest situation of his life, he continued: 'The hospital was understaffed and overcrowded with patients. It was a difficult time for everyone. But there was one nurse who never let it get her down, who treated each one of us patients as

³ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, pg. 742-743)

if we were royalty. Every time she came into my room, I felt a deep sense of peace. I have never felt anything like it since and I have never forgotten her. It was the happiest period of my life in spite of the physical suffering.’

“This is what God is saying to us. Every time we go into a room we can bring the peace of God. He has given us the power to be like that. Not only do we receive the gift from God through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we receive that power to share it.”⁴

But the choice is ours as to how we will live our lives - as being beaten-up or as being up-beat. As seeing all of the troubles and trials of the world trying to destroy any vestige of hope and happiness we might have in us, or using even the troubles and hardships and problems in our lives to let God work in and through us to make a difference in the lives of those around us - the choice is ours to live in us.

The very strange thing that happened on the way to Bethlehem was the opening of Joseph and Mary’s eyes and hearts to see the gifts that God was providing for them to bring about the birth of His Son. It was a journey of a lifetime that has been told for years, decades, centuries and millennia, with the hope of enabling us to also see what God can do in the midst of our lives as we turn to Him, trust in Him and then follow Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Let’s pray:

Father, thank You for the joy of Jesus Christ given to Joseph and Mary as they endured everything before them to bring about Jesus’ birth. Thank You for the struggles in our lives, for they drive us to choose Your guidance and direction for us to follow You every day with the same hoped for result - the joy and peace of Christ. Give us the courage to change our mindset from everything being a problem to everything being a gift from You. Then, lead us into the journeys of our lives, one step at a time, with the confidence that You will always be with us, caring for us, encouraging us, providing for us and even challenging us to deeper faith in You. No matter what we face, help us to see the possibilities for us to share the great Good News of Jesus with those around us. May we never fail to be the ones who walk into a room and bring the peace of Christ to those there, too. Keep working on us, Lord, for this we pray in the wonderful and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

⁴ (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, [Pleasantville, N.J.: Voicings Publications, 1982] pg. 222)