

A Strange Thing Happened On The Way To Bethlehem #1

“AN ANGEL’S VISITATION”

Isaiah 42:1-9, Nicene Creed, Luke 1:26-45

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“On February 23, 1996, three to four months into a pregnancy, a woman we’ll call Mary Clarke (name changed) of Downers Grove, Illinois, remembers, ‘I was not feeling very well. I was having a hard time breathing and was very dizzy.’ Her doctor said she should come in for an examination.

“As the nurse started to examine Mary, she said, ‘We’ll be able to hear the baby’s heartbeat.’ The nurse tried to pick up that heartbeat for a while but was unable to locate it. When the doctor came into the examining room, the nurse asked him to try to locate the baby’s heartbeat. The doctor tried for 10 or 15 minutes without success. He then decided to move Mary to an ultrasound room.

“In the ultrasound room, the doctor located the baby and tried again to hear the heartbeat. He couldn’t, so he asked the nurse to call another doctor. The second doctor tried to locate the heartbeat--for 15 minutes or more--but could not. At this point, the doctor told Mary and her husband, Ron, ‘I’m sorry, but the baby has died. I can’t tell you why, but these things happen. I’m very sorry, but you will have to be induced.’

“Mary says, ‘Ron’s and my heart were broken. We had lost our precious baby.’

“The nurse took Mary and Ron to the birth center and explained what would happen when they induced labor. The doctor also requested testing to find out why Mary was having difficulty breathing.

“As I was lying in bed,’ Mary says, ‘I prayed that God would watch over our child until we could meet him or her in heaven. My heart was broken, but I was filled with the hope that I would one day see my child.’ Meanwhile, Ron called Mary’s sister, who called a woman at their church, Pat Bailey, to ask her to pray. When Pat got the call, she said something startling: ‘That baby’s not dead. Tell them to double-check, to get a second opinion.’

“Ron and Mary talked about it and decided they would talk to the doctor one more time before anything was done, just to confirm the decision. To appease the couple, the doctor ordered another ultrasound.

“Back in the ultrasound room, a new nurse, who did not know why this couple was there, started the ultrasound. In a moment she said matter-of-factly, ‘And there's the heartbeat.’

“Mary asked her, ‘Are you sure the baby is okay?’

“The nurse told her, ‘The baby's heartbeat is perfect, no problems.’

“Mary turned and looked at the nurse from the birth center: ‘Her jaw dropped, and her eyes were as round as saucers.’ The nurse called the doctor to come look at the monitor. ‘I can't believe it,’ he finally said. ‘If I had not seen this, I would not have believed it. This is not the same baby I saw on the other ultrasound.’

“As a precaution, Mary was admitted to Good Samaritan Hospital for observation. The doctor came to her room later. ‘I would like to give you an explanation for what happened,’ he managed, ‘but I have none. A diagnosis like this is always verified by a second doctor. But,’ he went on, ‘there are times when medical science cannot explain everything. Sometimes the only explanation is that God intervened.’

“Mary says, ‘I did not need an explanation. I knew that God had performed a miracle, and that was all I needed to know.’

“On August 22, 1996, Jamie Andrew Clarke (name changed) was born--a healthy, beautiful boy. The doctor who delivered him was the same doctor who had seen the lifeless baby on the ultrasound. He said to Mary and Ron, ‘This baby is special.’”¹ Wow, the marvelous workings of God!

On a larger scale, this is exactly what has happened to humanity. At first, God created people perfectly, with new life in them to follow His will and His ways. God breathed life into all of His precious people, and for a time they thrived, and grew close in their relationship with the Lord God.

But something happened - sin entered into the world and the life of mankind was taken away. The heartbeat of God's presence in the people was no longer heard, and it seemed as if death loomed over the world because they no longer followed the ways of the Lord God Almighty. It seemed that the

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 179-181)

only thing left to do was to induce labor to rid the world of the lifeless people, to concede that the children created by God were dead. It was time to start over.

BUT GOD HAD A DIFFERENT PLAN. It was not to destroy humanity and try to start all over again. That had already been done, with the same lifeless results. BUT GOD chose to bring about another solution. He called out to the prophets and told them, *“Here is My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen One in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He established justice on earth. In His teaching the islands will put their hope”* (Isaiah 42:1-4). God desired to bring life back into the dead bodies of men and women here on the earth. But He planned to do it in the most amazing way.

God’s heart was broken for the spiritual death of His people. He longed for the people to have life through Him. And the Spirit of God spoke aloud, “Those people are not dead! There is still life in them! There is still hope!” So a second opinion was called for. A new “technician” was brought in to confirm the Lord’s plan. And new life was given in the most unusual way. Listen to the strange thing that God did on the way to Bethlehem. This is Luke 1:26-45. (READ Luke 1:26-45)

A new heartbeat was started in the lives of the people. God was at work bringing about something new. Already, a barren woman had conceived miraculously, whose child would become the harbinger of hope and peace. And then, THEN, God was about to bring the fullness of His plan for life to the world. And yet He orchestrated the event in a way that had never happened before - *“a virgin will conceive and bare a son, and His name shall be called Immanuel”* (Isaiah 7:14) the prophet had foretold. God was not done with His creation. He continued to have hope for His people.

But God did not just impose His will upon a woman unaware. He sent His servant Gabriel to let her know the new life that God had planned for the world, and to get her consent to do that work in her. So Gabriel told Mary the whole plan of God’s desire to bring life back to the people of the world. And

when Mary heard what Gabriel told her, she was amazed what God had in mind to do - through her - for the world - to bring new life to all who would believe!

Ah, it was not to be just another ordinary birth of a human child. No, this child would be a special child, the One to bring the heartbeat of God back into the life of men and women on earth. He would become God incarnate, God made flesh like us, in order to bring Salvation to the whole world, not just to her own people. The greatness of this child would exceed all other men, for He would be the Son of the Most High God, to reign over all the people in order to bring them to life - eternal life, as they trusted in Him and called on Him (Luke 1:32-33).

But Mary was not a perfect woman. None of the people of the world are perfect. So why had God singled out Mary from all the other young women of Israel? Was she a saint to be honored and glorified by other people? No! But Mary had lived a just and right life so as to find “*favor with God*” (Luke 1:30). She was a descendent of King David, and was pledged to be married to a man who was also a descendent of David. And God saw in Mary the strength and tenacity to trust in Him, even if He called her to do a very difficult thing as a young woman.

She was still a virgin, and God was going to bring the heartbeat of humanity back to the earth through the Child He would give to her. This Child would not be conceived through the will of a man, or because of a man’s purpose. The Holy Spirit would implant the Son of God into her womb so that He would be human AND God at the same time, the divine made flesh like us. God confined Himself into the seed of man, and He would become the very heartbeat of God for the world to save men and women, so that they could be born again, alive through Him. What an awesome task to be asked of any young woman! She would bring forth the Son of God into the world.

God was indeed asking Mary to do a very difficult thing. Though she herself was born into the sinfulness of the world, Mary was about to become the human mother of God’s Son, Jesus. If she consented to do this work of the Lord, trusting that He would protect her and direct her all along the way, God was about to revive the heartbeat of the people through her. Not that she should be

worshipped as the “Mother of God,” but that she would be the humble servant of the Lord so that God could bring about a new birth - a new heartbeat for the world.

But, you see, the world would not understand when she suddenly became pregnant and not yet married. In the minds of the people of the world, there is only one way for a woman to become pregnant, and that was by sexual relations with a man. For Mary to be a virgin, yet to become pregnant, was too much for people to understand, much less to believe. They would look upon her with contempt as if she had broken her pledge to Joseph. They would think that instead of her being a virtuous woman, they would have called her unfaithful at best. They would have treated her as a prostitute, fit only to be stoned to death because of her unrighteousness.

This obviously went through Mary’s mind as the angel, Gabriel, tells her about God’s plan of this miraculous birth. She is quick to question, “*How will this be...since I am a virgin*” (Luke 1:34)? Even she knew that this was something that only God could do - and to have it happen in her? Wow!

It’s no wonder then, that Mary sought out the council of her older cousin, Elizabeth. Who would know best of the miraculous workings of God than the very one who was given the ability to conceive far after her child rearing years were over and gone. Elizabeth knew full well the wonders that God can perform in the lives of those who are willing to let Him use them. She was now six months pregnant, and when Mary appeared at her doorway, not only was Elizabeth greatly pleased to see her, but the child within her leapt for joy. This was John, recognizing the Savior, Jesus, even in the womb.

Oh, the wonderful encouragement, and support, and life building, the two women shared during those next three months (Luke 1:56). Elizabeth would have poured hope and strength into the life of young Mary, and Mary would have been able to rejoice with Elizabeth for what God had done in her. What bonding the two women would have had with each other, to the point that shortly before John is born, Mary is able to return home to Nazareth, fully confident that the Lord God Almighty was able to do all that He had said He would do in her. She could now face the jeers and criticism that those in Nazareth would send her way. She knew precisely what God was up to, and was determined to see it

through to the end, no matter what.

And there were probably some nasty things that happened when Mary arrived home. Her parents would have been shocked, and hurt, and disgraced, and shamed. Not only would Mary receive criticism for what God was doing, but her family could possibly have suffered the side effects of the community, too. Hadn't they raised her properly? Hadn't they taught her right from wrong? Hadn't they given her instruction of how God expected young women to behave and conduct themselves? Yet, she arrives home three months pregnant without a husband! The cruelty that would have been sent Mary's way, and the way of the family, could have been tremendous.

But God had prepared her through the encouragement of Elizabeth. It had been a relatively easy decision at first to let God use her in this way, but Mary was finding out how hard being faithful to God could be in the face of family and community ridicule and reproach. Yet, the forming of a precious jewel occurs through great pressure, and in great heat, and in time. God was creating in Mary the precious corner stone that would bring the nations of the world back into a loving relationship with the Lord God Almighty. This was God's fashioning His marvelous heartbeat for all the world to see and understand. Though few would see it at that time from God's perspective, this precious jewel would soon shine out like the sun to illuminate the world of the glory of God.

And that was what made Mary God's choice to bear His Son into the world. Though faced with almost insurmountable odds, she remained faithful to God's call that she received from Gabriel, knowing that Jesus would become the Messiah. Her unconquerable spirit within her gave her the resolve she needed to fulfill God's plan for the Salvation of the world.

The road to Bethlehem began very humbly, and became very difficult, but throughout the journey God continued to support and strengthen and guide Mary through every step of the journey to bring forth the Son of God into the world. Like the precious jewel that was growing within her, Mary was also becoming refined and purified in her faith in the Lord, so that she could be looked upon by others as a true woman of virtue and righteousness, not to be worshipped, but truly to be honored.

And God calls each one of us to have that same resolve in our lives today. God is striving to fulfill His plan of the salvation of the world, and He has called each of us, every one of us, to have such faith in Him that we never falter in our faith, but resolve to do the work that He has called us to do. God is still working at bringing the heartbeat of humankind back to Him as we discover faith in the work of His Son, Jesus.

And many times the faithful are also called to do strange, if not impossible things, so that God can work in them and through them to draw all of us back to Him. We could be challenged to leave the job we've had for the last 15 years - the job of our dreams - to serve in a ministry project that touches the hearts and lives of men and women. We could be limited in our activities because of illness or accident, only to find that God has taken us through that life change to reach out to others struggling in similar ways. We may be called to support a little known project reaching out to teens and young adults to give them the discipline and drive they need in their lives to become productive. We may be called to open up our homes to provide space for Bible studies, or step out in faith to start a new support group. God may even call us to become a teacher in a foreign country where the Word of God is lacking. God calls out to us in the most amazing ways to use those who are faithful to bring the heartbeat of Jesus Christ to the lives of those who were once given up for dead.

But it takes faith. It takes resolve to do what we are being guided or asked to do. And when we faithfully do what we have been called to do, the results will be tremendously productive. New life will be given, new hope will emerge and people will be drawn into faith in the Lord. It works like this.

“Legend has it that a man was lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old shack - a ramshackled, windowless, roofless, weather-beaten old shack. He looked about this place and found a little shade from the heat of the desert sun. As he glanced around he saw a pump about fifteen feet away - an old, rusty water pump. He stumbled over to it, grabbed the handle, and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out.

“Disappointed, he staggered back to the shack. He noticed off to the side an old jug. He looked

at it, wiped away the dirt and dust, and read a message that said, ‘You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug, my friend. P.S.: Be sure you fill the jug again before you leave.’

“He popped the cork out of the jug and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live. Ah, but if he poured all the water in the old rusty pump, maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from down deep in the well, all the water he wanted. (It was a difficult choice, but one with the most amazing possible results.)

“So he studied the possibility of both options. What should he do; pour it into the old pump and take a chance on fresh, cool water or drink what was in the old jug and ignore its message? Should he waste all the water on the hopes of those flimsy instructions written, no telling how long ago? (Could he have faith in the directions of the note, and gain an abundance of water? Or would he only look out for himself and satisfy his raging thirst by drinking the jug full of water?)

“Reluctantly he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump - squeak, squeak, squeak. Still nothing came out! Squeak, squeak, squeak. A little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump. Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it. He filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents.

“Then he filled the jug for the next traveler. He filled it to the top, popped the cork back on, and added this little note: ‘Believe me, it really works. **You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.**’” (Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Thomas Nelson, 1998] p. 197)

Let’s pray: Father, give us the courage and resolve of Mary, to follow Your call in our life, so that the heartbeat of God can come back into the people of the world today through our witness of faith in Jesus Christ. Help us not to look out only for our own personal interests, but to become Your servants, willing to give it all away so that You can give back to us the life of Your Son, Jesus. Use us as Your vessels to bring Jesus into the world as we live for Him. This we pray in Jesus’ most holy and precious Name. AMEN.