

I understand that you have spent Advent talking about Mary! Mary sang this. Mary sang that. What am I? Chopped liver? I was the one who kept the people of Nazareth from stoning Mary when they found out she was “*with child*” during our engagement period. I was the one who risked my reputation by stating publicly that I would still take Mary as my wife, and her child as my own. I was also the one who got her to Bethlehem. It wasn’t Hertz or Avis. It was me. And it wasn’t a cute little donkey she rode. It was a mean old mule who had no intention of walking as far as I made him walk. If you think that was easy, try pulling a mule 80 miles sometime.

I’m sorry for complaining. It’s not your fault. All you have to go on is what Luke wrote down about those events. And all Luke had to go on was Mary’s version of how it all went down. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not bitter. Mary deserves your praise. After all, when Gabriel told her what God wanted to do, he wasn’t asking to borrow a cup of sugar. Imagine how you would act if an angel appeared to you and said, “*God is about to do something miraculous. But it might get you put to death, because what He’s asking you to do is illegal.*” So Mary really did step out in faith when she said yes to Gabriel - especially since she didn’t know how I was going to react to her “*good news.*” But how about if I share with you some of what Luke left out?

The story actually began way before Gabriel showed up. When Mary and I were young, our mothers knew each other. After all, Nazareth wasn’t that big of a place back then. One day, we were with them in the market. And as they talked, Mary and I ran off to play. Then Mary fell and began to cry. Being older, I helped her up, dusted her off, and tried to soothe her tears. When our mothers observed how we interacted, they decided that we were meant for each other. It took them a while to convince our fathers, but eventually Mary and I were betrothed. Now this may seem odd to you, but in Eastern culture, this is how it is done. For marriage is not seen as something that should be left to the whims of a hormone-addled teenager. Parents, grandparents, and town elders are trusted to know what is best for us.

That doesn’t mean it’s a done deal however. Parents can call things off at any time. So can the couple. And when the two get old enough - and reach the age of marriage - they have to decide whether or not to go through with the wedding. In this way, the arrangement is either ratified or broken. By the time Mary and I reached that point, we knew it was right however. We both were descended from King David. We both believed what we heard in the synagogue. And we both tried our best to live by the ways of our people. We also loved each other. So we agreed to go through with the marriage. At this point, our rabbi moved our relationship into a formal time of engagement. The engagement lasted a full year, and during that time we were already known as husband and wife. In fact, the time of engagement was so binding that it could only be broken by divorce. And if I were to have died during that time, Mary would have been recognized as my widow, with full rights to my estate (as little as it was at that point).

What you might not know from the words of Luke is what the engagement was all about back then, and why it was such an issue that Gabriel told Mary she was going to be “*with child*” during the time of our engagement. You see, in the world in which Mary and I lived the only way to know if someone was pregnant was to wait nine months. So, over time the rabbis had developed the

requirement that those wishing to be married had to wait at least a year before living as husband and wife. That way, they would know if the man and woman were blameless in their desire to be married. So, when Mary announced her “*good news*” it was a direct affront to all that our people considered holy, and it threatened to impact all of us.

That’s not all that Luke fails to fill you in on however. To hear Luke tell about the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, it’s as if I was just standing around like a cardboard cutout while Mary and God pulled off a miracle. But I was there every step of the way. And not just by agreeing to go forth with the marriage (as Matthew at least records). So, to give you a fuller picture of what was going on, let me add a few pieces of pertinent information.

First, none of this Christmas stuff would have happened if I had been vindictive. Sure, I got upset when Mary told me her “good news.” I hadn’t fallen off the turnip cart the day before. I knew there’s only one way to get pregnant. I also knew that the penalty for adultery was death. And since Mary was already legally my wife, I could have insisted she be punished for adultery. It was my legal right. But even if she had betrayed me, I couldn’t bear to see her hurt by others any more than I could have lifted my hand to harm her myself.

So, instead of hauling her into the public square, and accusing her of adultery in front of everyone, I decided to quietly give her a certificate of divorce. People would always wonder if the child were mine, I reasoned. And some of her relatives would probably accuse me of shaming Mary by making her live out her days as a divorced woman, but I couldn’t bear the alternative. After all, I loved her.

Second, none of this Christmas stuff would have happened if I had been spiritually obtuse. For even though I wasn’t able to believe what Mary said instantly, I did get around to believing that what she told me was true. And not just because an angel appeared to me in a dream. I’ve had plenty of dreams in my life. And not once before did I believe that God was trying to tell me something through those dreams. But this dream confirmed the truth I had seen in Mary’s eyes when she begged me to believe that she had not been unfaithful to me. So, despite the fact that it didn’t make any sense, and no one had ever heard of a virgin birth before, I concluded that Mary was telling the truth, and this was nothing less than God at work.

Third, none of this Christmas stuff would have happened if I had been lacking in compassion. Take what the gospel writers say about that night in Bethlehem. “*Mary*” they say “*gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.*” How many women do you think could have given birth, then stood up, knelt over a manger, and wrapped a baby in bands of cloth? Neither did Mary! I was the one who did the wrapping. Not that Mary didn’t do anything. It’s just that by the time she finished giving birth, she was just that: finished. And, who do you think helped Mary give birth? It wasn’t a doctor from St. Mary’s or Capital Health. It was me. And while I’m on the subject, who do you think supplied the “*cloth*?” It wasn’t Walmart. The cloth came from my tunic. I took it off while Mary was in labor, and tore it into long strips so that when the baby came, we could wrap him in those strips of cloth and keep him warm. Not to mention what I did with those strips of cloth over the next several days every time the dear little savior soiled them.

Finally, none of this Christmas stuff would have happened if I had been lazy. After all, while the baby was fed by Mary, how do you think she and I were fed? We weren't wealthy. Neither were the people of Bethlehem. No one was going to support us. If it weren't for my hard work, we would have starved. And where do you think we stayed? Not in a stable. I rented a house, and went to work each day to pay the rent, buy the food, and purchase all the other things we needed. For remember, despite what the people of your time sometimes think, the wise men didn't show up with their "gifts" until Jesus was two. We ate quite a bit between the night of his birth and his second birthday, and I was the one who earned every shekel it took to buy that food. As I tell you all this, please, don't get me wrong. I'm not bitter about any of this. I wouldn't change a thing - even if I could. I am proud of all that Mary did in bringing the Savior into the world. But I am also proud of what I did in helping that process along. So I'm not asking you to forget about Mary. Nor am I asking you to stop singing Mary's song with her. I'm just asking you not to forget me. I was there, too. And I did more than just stand around like a cardboard cutout while all this Christmas stuff came about. So remember me when you sing your carols and celebrate how I was also involved in what happened that night.

After all, you are actually more like me than you are like Mary. A hundred years from now, no one is going to write about your walk with God any more than Luke wrote about my walk with God. And thousand years from now, it is not likely that your name will be used in Christmas carols either. But without people like us (ordinary people who faithfully follow God and love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves), the love that the Savior came to offer the world cannot be made visible. May you, too, then, follow in my footsteps as well as sing Mary's song, and may you help God make His love visible for all the world to see - even if no one notices you doing it. For Jesus notices, and you will receive your reward in heaven when the real Christmas party begins.