

There in the middle of the room was a figure of a person, blurred out by the blinding halo around it, so she could only just make out the human form. It didn't move or speak — it simply stayed like it was with the light shimmering around it as though there was a tremendous amount of heat. She'd heard the whole flame description before, but it was so out of the ordinary that it jarred all of her senses.

When it spoke she cowered away, trembling against the wall and pulling the sheet up over her face.

“Greetings favoured one, God is with you.”

She couldn't make out what it said because she was so afraid. She did not feel favoured and she certainly did not sense God was near her.

There was so much she wanted to say and do, she wanted to scream or move or anything, but she was paralysed—every hair on end, heart racing, and breath quickening, her whole body shivering and tense. It wouldn't leave her, it just stayed there.

And it spoke again.

“Mary don't be afraid. The most incredible thing has happened and you probably won't comprehend the magnitude of it during this lifetime. But God sees you one of his favourite people. He really, really thinks that you've got what it takes to do this amazing thing.

“You're going to have a baby Mary! And you're going to call him Jesus which means “God saves.” He is going to be the most important person to ever have lived and will be called by people “the son of God”, and he will become king of Israel, but his reign won't be just for a normal life time, but forever Mary, until the end of time.”

There was quite a long silence. Her jaw dropped, she stared ahead, she went to say something but the words just stopped in her throat somewhere. She blinked. She stared and she blinked again. Made herself sit up a little, tried to say something again and then slumped down. In the end the best she could do was scratch her head even though it wasn't itchy.

She looked at the angel, “You make it sound as if I will be pregnant within a month! How do you suppose this will happen, since I've never had sex and I certainly don't intend to until I'm married to Joseph?”

It was a good question. She was a woman with high morals, and a great deal of respect for her cultural and religious ideals about sexual purity. She had seen and heard

enough about how badly people treated women who became pregnant outside of marriage. They were an embarrassment to everyone in their family, they gained a reputation for being loose, for being a whore, having unredeemable insecurities, a bad up-bringing or for hanging out with the wrong crowd. She would lose her family, husband to be and friends—she would lose her life. There weren't too many options for single banished women in her society.

So when the angel made the bordering on indecent suggestion that she would become pregnant, it seemed that this might actually be a dream.

And there was no proof or anything like that offered by the angel. Instead the angel introduced a new dimension to her faith.

“Well, the Holy Spirit will be the father (well, in the loosest sense of the word). Look at it like this Mary, God formed Adam out of dust and he formed Eve of Adam's rib. These are things you believe to be true. Well, apply the same belief to this, that God is going to grow a baby inside you and there will be no sex involved. That's what makes this baby special.

“You've always suspected that God was powerful, well here's your chance to really believe. This is no trick, this is the real thing. Do you believe that God can perform miracles? You probably aren't aware of the fact that your relative Elizabeth is going to have a child. You know how old she is, but God has made it so. Do you believe that God will do things that are out of the ordinary?”

This was really, really bizarre. She sat there for a long time pondering this while the angel hung around almost excitedly. It was too weird to think that out of her body would come the long awaited Messiah. A child she didn't even consider having and nurturing was going to be a great and mighty king. Son of the Most High? That's what the angel said . . . Holy Spirit? What was that exactly...there was nothing obvious in her bible that mentioned it? Her child would be born holy. Wow. She couldn't help but feel that this hadn't happen before, well not as far as she could see in what she had as the scriptures.

The angel appeared to be waiting for her response. She had a million questions, but she knew that none of them were appropriate, and the answer she had just been given actually raised more questions. And when you're in a situation like that you have to let logic go and simply trust.

Why not? Why couldn't God do this? Well this is where the rubber met the road. Saying yes to this calling was committing to the prospect of being alienated by her family, her future husband Joseph, and the rest of her community. Saying yes also meant redefining her faith.

Little did she know that these choices were the least of her worries.

But still she said the most staggering thing. A girl of about 15 years of age, putting this monumental trust in God. She wasn't making a small sacrifice here, this wasn't a little cutside test to see if God was real, her life was on the line at this point, her future, her faith . . . she had no precedent in history for what she was about to do.

And she took the risk. It was all on the line. And she said, "Here am I, the servant of God; let it be with me according to your word." And the angel left her to the quietness of contemplating a new life that lay ahead. She knew there was a cost in theory, but she didn't know how much it would hurt. Good news comes at a cost.

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"I'm so sorry," she said, hoping it might make a difference because the fact she was smiling instead of crying until this point wasn't really helping him understand.

It had been three months since she had seen her husband-to-be and over that time her secret had grown into a substantial little bump. The time had come for Mary to tell Joseph that she was pregnant, there would be no use hiding this fact now. And so when she met up with him she was reasonably straight to the point.

The last three months were preparation for this moment. She had been living with her relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah who had been childless. They were in their sixties now and the weirdest things were happening.

Zechariah had seen a vision one day when he was serving as priest in the temple. An angel called Gabriel told him that his wife was going to become pregnant and they would have a son called John. He hesitated and questioned the angel as to why God would answer his prayer only now after so many years of praying day after day. Why now? And so he asked for some proof. And Gabriel said to him, "Because you are not taking God at his word, you will not speak another word until the baby comes." And Zechariah became mute.

And, sure enough, the next thing you know, Elizabeth is pregnant.

Mary had always liked them, they were like spiritual grandparents to her. They had a deep faith that had weathered some very difficult times and Mary loved that about them. They trusted God even though it hurt.

So the day Mary had seen the angel from God she knew it would be best to work through the experience with them before anyone else. So she went to hang out with them for a few months and when she arrived Elizabeth beamed with excitement. “Mary! How wonderful it is to see you! I can’t believe that God would do this to us! Why should the mother of our lord come to our house? Why should we of all the people on this planet have this honour?”

Mary was amazed. This wasn’t the response she thought she would get. She expected sympathy but still disbelief, she expected that they would both look at her and try to convince her she was wrong, misguided and gullible, that no angel had appeared to her . . .

But instead the first thing that Elizabeth said to her was, “You are the most God looked after woman alive! It’s amazing to think who you are carrying around in your tummy right now. When I heard your voice the baby in my womb leapt and bounded around inside me, it seems so excited to be close to your son. Your child is going to be the one who re-establishes our country.”

“Mary, the greatest gift has been given to you because you have faith in God’s power.”

At that moment the good news of Jesus was easy to carry.

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But now she stood trembling in front of her future husband Joseph who was sitting down. He was so angry. He had led a very good life. He had done everything right, gone to church when he needed to, been a part of the church education programmes, helped out with the events and the services. His family were proud of him.

And now after Mary had told him, Joseph’s ideal little world had been demolished. A world that was so black and white became very, very grey.

He held his head with his hands, clenching his hair so tightly that the knuckles were turning white. His chest had tensed up and his stomach was cramping. He tried to speak.

All the emotions stormed around him and through him. All the questions battled each other to be the first to be asked. There was no order anymore, just chaos and he looked desperately for God in all this and felt desperately alone.

“What do you take me for Mary? Who is the father. Who is he? And don’t tell me it’s god, that’s blasphemy and I could stone you for that. Who is the father. Tell me? . . . at least be honest with *me* Mary?”

She looked at him now with tears in her eyes and said nothing. There was nothing more to say. She had told the truth and all her worst nightmares were being realised.

She thought God might have organised things a bit better than this. She had said yes in faith and now things had gone all pear shaped. Maybe she had been a little naïve to think that this great privilege that God had given her was going to make for plain sailing . . . and then she had a terrible thought.

What if it had just been a dream and an illusion? She began doubting the whole experience but there was no other explanation for this baby. How else did she get pregnant? And along with her own questions about the craziness of this situation she looked at the man she loved . . . she actually loved him . . . and he was so full of hate and he looked at her like she was a whore . . . and she realised she would lose him.

Joseph thumped his fist on the table, “tell me who the father is!” he shouted at her desperate that maybe his anger would bring out the truth. He loved her but was so outraged at her infidelity to him and he was torn because he wanted to hold her but he also wanted to hurt her. Why won’t she answer me? Why can’t she tell me? Why can’t she trust me?

He took a long look at her as she stood there isolated in silence. They both had words to say but there just didn’t seem any point.

Joseph shook his head and with as much venom he could muster he said, “Well I hope you and your ‘god’ child have a great life together, Mary” and left the room by slamming the door.

The good news became a burden almost too much to bear.

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Mary slumped onto the chair and wept.

“God? Why are you doing this to me? Why are you making my life so miserable all of a sudden? I didn’t ask for any of this. You chose me remember? Do you remember what you said? That I was favoured. Is this how you treat

your favoured ones? Why are you making me doubt myself? Why are you making me doubt you?"

She remembered the song she wrote at Elizabeth's when there was so much joy about her being pregnant with God's son. She sang:

All the spiritual stuff inside me wants to say that God is incredible. Yeah, I'm so happy all over and it feels like it will never end!

For some reason he has selected me for a wonderful purpose, and everyone who hears of me in the future will call me specially looked upon by God.

God is holy, his purity is totally different to anything I know and he has powerfully acted in my life with a miracle. I am in awe of how totally pure and wonderful he is.

He is good to those who hold in tension his judgement with his love and who can pass this tension on to those who are younger than them.

He has performed a miracle and made people who think highly of themselves disconnected and random. He has brought crashing down those who have elevated themselves into positions of unnatural power and let those who put others first become the important people in the economy of life.

He provides sustenance for those who have little, and lets those who hoard up for themselves become bankrupt in their hearts.

He has remembered the people who love him, even though they aren't always faithful to him, who are even downright disrespectful to him, and in spite of that he remembers long made promises to the people who have kept our faith alive over the centuries to bring about this magnificent day!"

That was the song she made up. Beautiful. But it didn't make any sense any more. As she sat there weeping over the lost love of her husband and the prospect of being a solo mum in her day and age, she caught a glimpse of the horrible tension she would carry for the rest of her life. And it's a tension that we all experience that call ourselves Christians.

Anyone who lets Jesus into their lives does so at a cost. And Mary knew the cost like none of us ever will.

Sure, Joseph did marry her after God spoke to him, but there are still the inevitable scars that people carry with them after enormous fights. And sure love conquers all, but in the less than ideal world we live in, these things do haunt us. This happy ending on our Christmas nativity scenes was but a moment in a difficult journey for Mary and Joseph.

Mary who would be called Blessed for generations to come, mother of a child that Joseph could not call his own. Jesus, her child and God's child, different and set apart, who had fed from her breast and played with other children, whose nappies she had changed and whose bottom she had wiped, Jesus a little human baby.

She remembered the staggering story of three shepherds who saw a heavenly host of Angels and came to see Jesus and said to Mary that this baby in her arms was the future king of all people!

And then on the day they dedicated Jesus a prophet called Simeon came over to them. He had been told by God that he would not die until he had seen the one who would save humankind.

Simeon said that this baby Jesus was the hope for all people, not just the Jews, but the entire world. This was staggering and Mary and Joseph were amazed. They looked at each other proud as punch that all the cost had been worth it because this was truly good news!

But here's the stink part, Simeon carried on. "This child is going to make many people either rise or fall, not only in the sense of wealth and power, but in their sense of personal worth. He is going to be opposed by many people and his challenges will make them violent against him. The things this boy has got to say are going to anger those who think they know best and they will be shown for what and who they truly are. Don't think you two are exempt from this either. You are in for a painful ride."

Their hearts sank—the good news burden was going to be long term.

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Was Mary blessed? Yes, she was the mother of Jesus. But it came at a great cost to her. She would watch him reject her at the age of twelve as he was arguing with the chief priests in the temple or "his Father's house." Then years later he is

actually in ministry, He even asked the question in front of a crowd when she sent for him, “who is my mother?” Sure it was a theological point but it still hurt.

Mary was watching as people misunderstood him, as he was starving himself for 40 days at a time, and living a life with such a busy and stressful schedule. She was watching him spend time with lepers and touching them. He started to hang out with the bad crowd, the roughnecks and the vagabonds. He dined with traitors and he caused disruptions in the temple by overturning tables and setting livestock loose. The lawyers and ministers of the word hated him.

Was she proud of this? Was she able to have enough faith to just let this happen without feeling any fear for the child she had raised? Standing there as an onlooker as he is hanging naked on a cross on the public crossroads, humiliated, beaten and dying. Blessed? Was this woman blessed or tortured by these things as any normal mother would be?

Sure she witnessed the resurrection which would have been totally amazing, sure she witnessed the miracles, sure she saw a lot of positive and wonderful things—and we think only of the happy stuff at Christmas—but she also saw the horror of a world reject her child, falsely accuse him and execute him like a common criminal. How much do we think she appreciated that? The Christmas story for Mary was not the same as the one on our Christmas cards—it involved the choice to trust God with everything even though she could see it was probably going to hurt.

There is a place for suffering and sorrow in Christmas. It is part of the Christmas story. The happy endings only came about because of the unhappy stories before them. I think the most wonderful thing about the Christmas story is that Jesus came into the middle of our suffering and lived as a sufferer among us. He did not shy away from our tears, but was drawn to them. Isn't that what the Good news is about?

The Christmas story is about hope, when Mary looked at her baby she couldn't possibly see how he would change the world, but she thought that one he could. And then one day he did but at a great cost to himself and to those who followed him.

Mary is blessed not because she had no pain, but because she had hope.

Mary is blessed not because she did not suffer, but because she had trust.

Mary is blessed not by her circumstance, but by her response.

Let us pray