

Introduction

This season of the year provides a wonderful glimpse at our culture's inability to really grab hold of the biblical story, in spite of it being the excuse for the season. Even the most cynical skeptic has to admit that Christmas has something to do with Jesus.

But, isn't it remarkable how little Jesus actually turns up in all the Christmas programming? For every "Nativity Story" we have a slew of shows like "Frosty the Snowman," "Rudolph, the Red Nosed Reindeer," "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," "A Charlie Brown Christmas," "It's a Wonderful Life," "Miracle on 34th Street," and even "A Christmas Carol," where Jesus is never mentioned (or makes the briefest of cameo appearances). By the way, as I was growing up, my family watched all of these shows (and many others) – but, back then TV was relatively new and had 3 channels (if you don't count UHF).

Here's our PR problem. Somewhere along the way our culture decided that Christmas was for children. But the Christmas story is PG-13 (or R, if you tell the part about the slaughter of the innocents; or if you try to explain to your 8 year old what a virgin is). The actual story at the root of the holiday is stunning and compelling. It's a great story. It's just not a kiddy story.

Take today's gospel reading. There is courage and fear and faith. There is effervescent joy. There is intense worship. There is a depth of insight about the nature and work of God. There just isn't much for kids. That's why "Frosty the Snowman" gets air time in December and "Mary and the Magnificat" doesn't.

So, let's look at today's gospel reading without holiday season sentimentality and see what we can learn about who God is and how we relate to Him.

Courageous Commitment:

"Mary arose and went with haste..." Why "with haste"? By mentioning her kinswoman, Elizabeth, the angel hinted that she might want to visit her. But she also knew that at some point in the next few weeks everyone in Nazareth was going to know her little secret. Think about what her encounter with the angel meant for Mary. She chose to say "yes" to God even though it would certainly mean the loss of her reputation (after all, who is going to buy this virgin birth story?); it would likely mean rejection by Joseph and the Jewish community and having to raise her son without the support of a family or village in a culture that had no means of provision for a single woman not under a man's headship, except slavery or prostitution; it might even mean her death. And she still said "yes." Mary's courageous commitment to God is part of the PG-13 version of the Christmas story.

Miraculous Comfort:

Imagine Mary on her 4 day trip from Nazareth to Elizabeth's village. What was she thinking? Did she ever wonder if she had imagined it all? Did she ever think to herself, "Mary, you have crossed over into yaya land. You have lost touch with reality." Or did Mary ever wonder what in the world God was doing? "Is it so important in your grand scheme of salvation to ruin a peasant girl's life? Couldn't the Messiah be born to a married woman?" If Mary harbored these kinds of doubts, they were wonderfully set aside by God's intervention through Elizabeth.

What a great moment! Mary comes to Elizabeth's house and calls her name. The child, the six month old fetus, in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Elizabeth, in her excitement, shouts a Spirit-inspired greeting, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." What a great moment for Mary! Elizabeth couldn't know that Mary was pregnant, unless God had revealed that knowledge to her. Here is miraculous confirmation of the angel's word.

And Elizabeth goes on: "Why is it granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ... Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Any residual doubt melts away at the words of Elizabeth. God is at work.

Profound Worship:

And now it's Mary's turn. Inspired by the Spirit she breaks into intense praise and reflective poetry. Her poem, using Hebrew parallelism, has two main parts: a personal statement that grounds her joy in the character and action of God (vv. 46-50), and a wider reflection of the ways of God and His covenant faithfulness (vv. 51-55). Her poem hearkens back to the rich tradition of Old Testament poetry; particularly the Song of Hannah and the Psalms.

v. 46-47 Mary finds a wonderful blend of focusing on the Lord ("My soul magnifies the Lord") while expressing her personal feelings ("My spirit rejoices – the same word that Elizabeth uses to describe John's exuberant joy - in God my Savior"). She is able to speak personally and profoundly at the same time.

v. 48 Mary describes her experience. Note the complete lack of self pity, though she is being called to a very difficult obedience.

v.49 Grounds her experience in the character of God: mighty, holy.

v. 50 Grammatically the end of the first section though it also transitions to the second as Mary moves from her experience to reflect on God's ways more generally. And it is His mercy and faithfulness that are foremost in her mind.

v. 51-53 Mary declares the same pattern of reversal that Jesus will declare. The kingdom of God does not belong to the proud, the mighty or the rich. It belongs to the humble and the hungry. And most particularly, it belongs to the offspring of Abraham.

It is this vision of God's mighty power, His holiness, His mercy and His faithfulness that will sustain Mary as she endures the painful days of Joseph's rejection, the on-going besmirching of her reputation [remember the Pharisees' challenge to Jesus declaring Him to be a Samaritan?], and most of all the horrible ordeal of watching the fruit of her womb suffering on a cross as He truly becomes her Savior.

Conclusion

God's call on Mary's life was risky for her and required remarkable faith. But as her song reveals, her soul and spirit were ready to walk a difficult path; trusting in a mighty God whose holiness and mercy would make a way; trusting in a God whose faithfulness would be unwavering; trusting in a God whose kingdom turns the world upside down to make it right side up.