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NEVER THE SAME

STORIES OF THOSE WHO ENCOUNTERED JESUS

STEVEN JAMES



Never the Same: Stories of Those Who Encountered Jesus
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God with us

CHAPTER ONE

(Matthew 1:18-2:23; Luke 1:26-56)

“Wake up!” His mouth is against my ear; his words urgent, rushed. Gently but firmly, he grabs my shoulder and shakes me awake. For a moment the strength in his hands startles me.

“What? What’s wrong?” I open my eyes, but I’m afraid to move. My heart is thumping.

He pulls the warm wool blanket off me. A rush of cold air sends shivers down my spine. The flickering oil lamp in the corner of the room sends wild shadows dancing across the walls.

Joe is already dressed. “C’mon, we need to get outta here. Grab the baby and let’s go.”

“But it’s the middle of the nigh—”

“I know what time it is. The longer we stay, the more danger we’re in.”

Now I’m really scared. The baby! My baby is in danger!

I stand up stiffly and rush toward the child. “How do you know?”

“Um . . . I’ll explain on the way.”

Wrapped up in thick blankets, sleeping in the cradle that Joe made for him, the baby looks so peaceful. So innocent. I pick him up gently. Even though Joe isn’t the father, he has always looked out for him. Protected him.

As I glance around in the faint light, I notice Joe has grabbed only one small bag.

“Where are we going?”

“Far away. To Egypt,” he says.

Egypt? I clutch the baby to my chest as Joe snatches up a few of his tools and the gifts we’d been given earlier that night and tosses them into the sack. Sure, the presents are valuable, but they’ll hardly cover a trip to Egypt and back.

Or maybe we aren’t coming back.

“We’ll be safe. Hurry!”

Safe from what? I think, as he grabs my hand, and we stumble out into the chilly night. All I can think of is how I got into this predicament in the first place.



I never suspected I was pregnant.

The day I got the news I was totally surprised. Shocked. This pregnancy was about as unplanned as they come.

Not only was I surprised, I was also scared. I had so many questions. *What do I do now? Who could I talk to? Who could I trust?*

I kept thinking, I’m 14 years old, I’ve never even kissed a guy, and I’m gonna have a baby!

I could just hear people talking. “Another pregnant teen. Another unwed mother. Just what we need. What is this country coming to?”

But I am married! Well, sorta. Joe and I had been engaged for a couple of years, since I was about 12. Yeah, I’ll admit it’s a little young, but he was a good guy with a steady construction job. And he loved me.

But I knew how my friends would react to the news. Whispers. Rumors. Getting all quiet when I walked by. Stepping aside to let me pass. Talking about me when I wasn't around. I knew the names they'd call me, the things they'd say. Who could blame them?

Where could I turn? I'd never felt so alone.

For starters, pregnant teens aren't exactly welcome in my town. Usually, they'd do their best to keep it quiet for as long as possible and then, when word leaked out, there'd be trouble. Big trouble.

When I was just a kid, there was this girl who was caught in bed with her boyfriend. Her relatives didn't waste any time with lawyers or lawsuits. They just gathered some neighbors, formed a little mob, dragged her into the street, and killed her. Premarital sex is not taken lightly here.

I wondered how soon it would be until the neighbors found out about me.

No one was gonna believe my story. Everyone would think Joe and I had slept together. And since he's 31, we'd both be in trouble. Everyone would blame him for taking advantage of me, saying he should have known better, that it was his fault. Then the law would get involved—and who knows what would happen.

But the thing is, Joe and I had never had sex. Honest! Our relationship wasn't physical at all. Oh, I know what you're thinking now. "She's engaged to this one guy, and there she is sleeping around!"

But I wasn't! I swear!

It was all so confusing. I wished there was an easy way out—or at least someone to talk to.

I guess I could've told Joe. "Hi, sweetie, how was your day? Things have been a little slow here. By the way, Gabe stopped by. Yeah, the angel who appeared to Daniel about 600 years ago. He told me I'm gonna have God's baby even though I'm still a virgin. My son is gonna be King of the Universe. Other than that it's been a pretty boring afternoon." What would he think? What would you think—that I'd been eating rotten figs again?

All he had to do was say the word, and I'd be killed.

Now don't get me wrong. Joe is a really strong believer. I didn't think he'd turn me in, but honestly, I couldn't expect him to stick with me either. After all, it's not his baby. He'd be ridiculed, mocked. Maybe worse. And the angel hadn't even mentioned him. So I assumed I'd be a single parent, going it alone.

Even if Joe believed me, who else would? Sure we could rush and get married. But it doesn't take that much effort to count the months. Everyone would be thinking we were sleeping together before we got married, or at least there'd always be questions about who the father really was. If our engagement did survive, it would ruin Joe's career. We'd be outcasts forever. Despised. Alone.

So I just stood there pinching myself, thinking, *Okay, Mary, chill out. That was a real angel. You are not imagining things. You are not crazy. You are not crazy.*

But who would believe me? I just wished there was someone I could talk to. Someone who could understand how a girl feels when—

Liz!

The angel had said something about my cousin Liz being pregnant as well. She and her husband had been trying for years to have kids. I kept wondering why God hadn't answered their prayers and given them a child. But now! What had the angel said? "Nothing is impossible with God!"

I had to be sure. And I had to talk to someone who would be able to understand. So I grabbed a few things and headed to Liz's place in the country.

The trip took me about a week, which was pretty good time, considering. I mean, a young girl traveling the streets by herself? You know the kind of stuff that can happen. But I guess God was with me—no, I know he was. I arrived safe and sound.

And then I knocked on her door.

“Hello? Anyone home?” The door was unlocked, so I walked in. “Liz, you are not gonna believe what happened to me last week!”

“Mary? Is that you?”

You should have seen her face when I walked into the room.

The second she saw me, she started calling me God’s mommy and stuff like that, really honoring me. She even said that the baby she was carrying jumped for joy when I walked in the door. It blew me away.

That was it. That moment I knew for sure everything was for real. I couldn’t keep it in anymore. I just burst out singing!

I stayed to help during her pregnancy. And then after Liz had her baby (it was a boy, by the way), I knew I needed to return to Nazareth. I had to tell Joe. Regardless of how he might respond, he had to know. And I wanted to be the one to tell him.

I mean, think about it. One day I’m there, and the next I’m gone. No word. Nothing. Then three months later I return home—three months pregnant. I wanted to make sure I caught up with him before the rumors did.

I went straight to the construction site. When he saw me, he threw down the saw and came jogging over to me, calling out, “Mary, where have you been? I heard . . .”

He knew.

Maybe it was the look on my face. Or the way I stood. Or the stories he’d heard. But somehow he knew.

“Joe, let me explain.”

“Are you . . . ?”

I told him. And as I did, he lowered his eyes. I rambled on about God and angels and miracle babies, kings and thrones and impossible promises.

And then he looked at me. It wasn’t sadness in his eyes—or even disappointment, like I’d expected. He didn’t seem angry, just

sort of confused. I knew he was trying to believe me, to piece it all together. He wanted me to be telling the truth, but a storm of emotions passed over his face.

“It’s true, Joe. It’s a miracle!”

“Mary, I need to think.” Then he turned and walked away.

I couldn’t blame him. After all, I’d needed three months to let the news sink in. I couldn’t expect him to be jumping off the walls the moment I arrived back home. But watching him walk away that day was one of the hardest things I’d ever done. Would he come back? Or would I be facing the future alone? A voice inside of me was screaming, *No! Come back! I’ll do anything you want—just don’t walk away from me!*

That night I begged God to show Joe the truth, to make it clear to him.

That’s when I started thinking about the name the angel had told me to give my son. You’d spell it “Jesus” or Joshua. But of course we spelled it “Yeshua,” like the warrior who replaced Moses as the leader of our people and like the high priest during the time when they rebuilt our temple. The angel said he’d be a king! My son, the Warrior, the Priest, the King!

His name means, “Yahweh saves.” Yahweh! God’s name, the name he told to Moses. It means, “I AM.” Or as my father told me when I was growing up, “The One who is always present.” I was carrying Yeshua—“the God who is always present, the God who saves.” Hadn’t Isaiah the prophet written that when the Messiah came, he would be called “Immanuel,” that is, “God with us”? It was true!

God with us . . .

The angel had said I’d be with child. How strange—when it’s really the other way around. The child would be with me.



As we grab the donkey to saddle her for the journey, Joe turns to me.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary. Our God will be with us.”

Our God will be with us . . . just as he was with Moses and Joshua and Daniel and Isaiah. Our God will be with us—the promise whispered through the centuries ever since the days of the prophets. Most people don’t believe in that stuff anymore.

But I do. As I look down into little Yeshua’s eyes, I realize God is already with us: to go anywhere we go, to face any troubles we face, to calm any fears we have. So we never have to be alone again. Not ever.

And as I climb onto the donkey and prepare for the trip, the child reaches out his hand for me. And smiles.

making it personal

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered.

“May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

—Luke 1:38

As much as Mary trusted, as spiritual as she was, as faithful as she was, as “full of grace” as she was, she still had questions. She couldn’t help it. That angel’s promises just weren’t logical. They didn’t make sense. How could God be born? How could the One who shaped the universe let himself be shaped in her womb? How could her helpless child be the Almighty God? God with a bellybutton?! It was the greatest mystery and the wildest joke ever told. And it was being told through her life.

And there were consequences in trusting that angel. It would mean a different life from that moment on. People would talk. People would shake their heads. They might not believe her ever again. She’d be rejected. Alone. Forgotten and despised.

But she said “yes,” despite the questions. She said “yes,” because she had faith.

So she became the mother of the Mystery. And she pondered it all in her heart (Luke 2:19), treasuring it all up but never fully understanding it. From the moment she placed her child in that manger to the day she saw him hang on a cross, Mary lived with the most indescribable and irresistible mystery of all. And of course, the questions that came with it. With him.

And she found the wonder and joy of seeing God in the flesh. Of teaching him right from wrong. Of protecting him from danger. She watched the unchangeable change. She held hands with the Almighty. She rocked to sleep the One who never slumbers.

Try filtering all that through your typical Sunday school lesson! Try telling that to your friendly neighborhood churchgoer! It doesn't make sense. It's not supposed to make sense.

Loving your enemy doesn't make sense. Laying down your life for people who hate you doesn't make sense. But a God we can understand and figure out and put into our little box of reason would have to be a pretty small god indeed.

And so the child grew. And he learned to love Mary in a mysterious way—as his sister through faith and his mother through birth. The paradox of all paradoxes—she was both the mother of God and the child of her Son.

She trusted but didn't understand. She carried the Mystery inside her. She raised him. She changed his dirty diapers. She's an example for us all of the courage and the foolishness and the boldness and the wonder of faith.

So even today she is the sister of all who believe. And her Son is still with us. Still in us. Still reaching out his hand for us. And smiling.

Especially in that life-changing moment when we finally believe.

taking it deeper

1. Think of what it was like for Mary to say “yes” to that angel. Why might she have hesitated? If you were Mary, what would you have said?
2. What does it tell you about Mary’s faith that she said “yes” right away? What lessons can we learn from her?
3. Mary said “yes” to the mystery of God’s presence in her life—and her life was changed forever. How has God’s presence changed your life? In which areas do you see the most change? Where do you see the least change? What will you do about that?
4. Mary had some questions for the angel. What questions keep you from drawing closer to Jesus? Did Mary’s questions get in the way of her faith? What can you learn from that?
5. Is there a difference between knowledge and faith? How would you describe that difference to an alien from another planet? (Hint: Check out Hebrews 11:1 for a quick definition of faith.)
6. Did Mary need more knowledge or more faith? What about you?
7. Some people describe Mary as “full of grace.” What do you think they mean by that? Read Ephesians 2:8-9. Could that phrase be used to describe your life, too?
8. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus makes an astonishing promise to his friends. Look it up. How does this verse relate to the story? How does it relate to your life today?
9. Do you live as if this verse is true? What difference would it make in your life if you were to trust Jesus’ promise that he will always be with you? How would that affect the way you pray? The way you handle problems? The times you feel lonely? What changes will you make in your life based on this verse?

breaking free

*Jesus,
you were with mary.
you were with joseph.
and you're with me, too.
you are the One who is always present.
you are the One who saves.
help me to have the same kind of faith that mary had.
sometimes i'm not sure
what to think or what to believe.
sometimes my questions
get in the way. help me to remember
that your plan for my life is bigger
than my grandest dreams . . .
your love is greater than my sin . . .
and your grace is greater than my past.
help me to say, "i am your servant,
may it be to me as you have said."
you're a mystery to be sure.
but a mystery i want to be a part of.*

*help me to believe—really believe—
and then to live out that faith.
amen.*