

DEAR REVELERS

If roller coasters were around when I was a young girl, I'd be the first in line. I'd be sprinting for a seat in the front car. Once we chugged upward and reached the pinnacle, I'd be that daredevil taking my hands off the bars, waving them over my head and shrieking with delight as we picked up speed. And my stomach dropped into my pelvis. *Woosh!*

My part of the Christmas story begins with an angel showing up and saying, "Hey Mary, here's an idea. How about getting yourself pregnant outside of marriage? Don't worry, this is God's idea. You'll just need to disregard everything you've ever been taught about not getting pregnant outside of marriage, and you'll need to flat out ignore everything ever written about that in the Torah. But I promise, you won't regret it. I realize you only met me five minutes ago, but I need you to trust me on this. Oh, did I mention that it's God who will get you pregnant? You lucky girl!"

After guarding my virginity as fiercely as a girl my age was expected to, I should have given the angel a firm "no". To do this would be the ruin of any young woman, but especially me, dirt poor with zero connections to people in high places. But I said yes. With that, the angel personally ushered me to a seat in the front car of the wildest ride of life I could ever imagine.

I didn't exactly say "yes" to the angel. No, my exact words were, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." See what I did there? "Here am I". It's what important men in scriptures always said when God gave them important tasks. How thrilling to hear those words coming out of my mouth, the mouth of me, a woman. Moses in the wilderness startled by a burning bush. Young Samuel, sleepless after three dreams in a row where God called him by name. Isaiah in the Holy of Holies with seraphs winging overhead, bringing burning hot coals to his lips.

And me, just Mary, bolted to the ground in the wonder of this moment. I was engaged to Joseph and honor-bound to save myself for him. Here I am now consenting to this new plan of having God's baby. "Here am I". The first woman in scripture to ever talk to God using these words. It was me taking my hands off the grip rails of my obscure life in the underclass of my gender to yield to God as no woman ever did. "Let it be with me according to your word." *Woosh!*

Everything about Christmas was a wild ride. Please remember it that way. When Joseph found out I was pregnant, he married me anyway and thank God for that! I don't know where I would have gone or what I would have done otherwise. Society then offered few options to unwed mothers, all of them bad.

Speaking of wild rides – soon Joseph and I were zig-zagging our way from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Judea. Something I'd never wish on any pregnant woman anywhere. Then we discovered there were no rooms at the inns in Bethlehem. Time for more practice in a skill I'd use for the rest of my life: making alternate plans at a moment's notice. I'm the original Elastigirl. Flexibility was my spiritual gift. My belly wasn't the only part of me that need to stretch and accommodate to what God had in store.

Joseph stood at the stable door worrying, I felt its warmth – mounds of soft hay, the unmistakable smell of animal dung and chicken feathers, the funny sideways chewing of goats. My eyes found the feeding trough. I studied it from several angles, then shrugged, and nodded to Joseph. “Sure, why not?” I said, laughing despite myself. Could things get any stranger?

My water broke and my heart soared. But can I just say that I do not recommend childbirth in a stable. “He will be great,” I chanted, repeating the angel's words and swiping at flies between contractions. “Son of the Most High,” I heaved, “Throne of David, Son of God, holy”. During the worst of my pain, I may or may not have lost my cool. I may or may not have roared out, “God, if this baby is as important as you say he is, why are we doing this the hardest possible way?”

Then the baby dropped from my womb into the waiting hands of the midwife. We both held our breath and waited. (Long pause here) First there was silence, and then **(Crying baby sound here)** this was the first out-breath of the divine child. What does Christmas mean to me? It means that sound.

I know who my child became. I know what he accomplished and what God accomplished through him. I know the things that transpired beforehand in anticipation of his birth – all of it recorded in sacred scripture.

Based on all of that, here is how I view Christmas: God called and sent various people on missions of mercy. But then he looked over humankind with a new mission in mind. God ponder the question “Whom shall I send this time?” and arrived at the only possible answer for this enormous task. “I will go,” God said, “I send me”.

When Jesus took his first breath and squalled as newborns do, this cry was none other than the voice of Yahweh, the God of yesterday, today, and forever, announcing, “Here am *I*.”

Hearing Jesus’ cry, Joseph stopping pacing and fell to his knees. The midwife smiled with relief and cut the cord. I reached for my newborn miracle and held his cheek to mine. With my labor ended, the animals adjusted themselves, remaking their beds, and settling into sleep. But, for me, there was still more to come, more of the never-ending strangeness of Christmas.

I’d barely gotten myself and Jesus comfortable when shepherd ruffians burst in on us talking about angels. Angels? Joseph and I exchanged knowing glances. He invited them in. Exhaustion notwithstanding, anyone who’s had a mystical experience as strange, compelling, and assuredly real as ours, were welcome here. The shepherds drew bread and cheese out of their sacks for an impromptu party. We shared angel stories and compared the details. One wrinkled fellow with cloudy eyes and leathered skin took a flute from his bag and began singing. Soon dancing shook the rafters, making me laugh. I fell asleep to their thumping and stomping. When I awoke in the morning to nurse my child, they were gone.

Days and nights ran together, and before long, we were on the road again. This time to the Temple in Jerusalem for my purification and Jesus’ dedication. It was also time for more unsolicited attention from total strangers. While Joseph was negotiating for turtledoves, a frail bearded man hobbled toward us. A very old woman was not far behind. When they reached us, the man dropped his cane and took Jesus from my arms. He clasped Jesus as if he’d been waiting for this moment his entire life. He prayed out loud and so did the woman. The man blessed us.

Then he stopped and looked at me sharply – looked into me. His look gave me a chill. His face darkened. “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed.” “And a sword will pierce your own soul too,” he jabbed his index finger into my sternum. Then I flew into a rage. I told him to mind his own business and snatched my baby back. I nearly knocked the old woman over. I may have overreacted.

Back in Bethlehem, more days and nights ran together. Then one day we opened our door to a third set of strangers. This time it was wealthy travelers, wearing fine robes dusty from a long journey. They held gifts fit for a king. We invited them in. Jesus was in my lap. They bowed and presented their gifts. They spoke quietly to Jesus in a language so different that we couldn't make out a single word. We knew nothing about them. I'm sure they told us their names, but those names sounded so foreign. Like with the band of shepherds, we shared food and drink. We smiled a lot. I let them stroke Jesus baby soft hair. They caught their breaths as Jesus' tiny hand curled itself around their bony fingers. After staying the night nearby, they left in a rush at dawn. They used exaggerated gestures, trying to help us understand their need for haste.

Suddenly the strange man in the Temple courtyard came to mind. I didn't want to think about him, but I did. “What next?” I asked Joseph as we waved them on their way.

We got our answer the next morning: Egypt, land of our sworn enemies. Egypt, what an odd place to raise a Jewish baby, let alone this baby. But remember, I'm Elastigirl. Off we went, zig-zagging our way again, this time with a child. Our journey involved crossing a desert in a manner I wouldn't wish on any mother of a young child. But my bravado self came to admire God for making things difficult.

After a few years in Egypt, we returned to quiet Nazareth. Jesus grew, played, laughed, fought, fussed over his food, and scraped his knees like any other boy. And yet Joseph and I found it hard to describe the feeling of living in these intertwined realities.

One moment, Jesus would startle us with wisdom and kindness beyond his years. The next moment, he would exasperate us.

To be the mother of this strange but fascinating puzzle of a child was all trial and error. Our quiet years unspooled from God's hand with all the contradictions of that first Christmas: from intensely holy to unbearably mundane.

I would often take breaks from chores to join Jesus in creative play. My favorite game was hide and seek. I covered my eyes and counted to ten. Then I'd search everywhere pretending not to see him, while edging closer. Finally he couldn't bear the excitement any longer. He'd burst into view yelling, "Here am I!"

With Jesus, every surprise was somehow not surprising. "Now what" Joseph and I said to each other the day he left carpentry and was baptized. "Now what?" When we heard about his ways with evil spirits, his healing touch, his harsh words for hypocrites. "Now what?" When we heard about the crowds that swelled as he traveled from town to town – savory and unsavory characters, poor and rich, old and young.

"Does any of this surprise you?" I remember asking Joseph. "No...and yes," He answered, and we'd both laugh in a worried way.

When I learned of his arrest, I whispered, "What next?" Days and nights ran together. Time sped up, slowed down. Finally grinding to a catastrophic halt. Jesus breathed his last. Welts on his back. Blood weeping from his wounds.

I returned to my home, weeping long and loudly. My body convulsed with a pain worse than any labor pain. After another spasm of grief I flew into a rage. "That old man in the Temple was wrong!" I shouted in the emptiness of the house. "This isn't a sword that's piercing me. This is thousands of swords. This isn't my soul in shreds. It's my heart"

Jesus quiet return on Easter morning was less of a surprise than you might imagine. Christmas being both my reference point and the story of my life made Easter less of a shock and more a heart-rending joy.

This extraordinary child, given to us from above and placed in my body without fanfare was restored to us from oblivion, also without fanfare. Everything, even the imaginary games we played together during his childhood, were readying us for this moment. Easter was me glancing up. It was him catching my eye. It was our wordless greeting, one to another, announcing, “Here am I.”

When I got home, I thought back to when Joseph asked long ago, “Are you surprised?” Today, breathless with the news of resurrection, I found myself nodding my head yes and then shaking my head no, and then nodding my head yes again.

“He will be great.” The old words echoed in my memory – “Son of the Most High. Throne of David. Holy.”

If I could do it all again, I would, but with one change. Throwing a party at the end of every single day we spent with Jesus. Flinging open our doors, calling neighbors and strangers. Inviting them to eat bread and cakes, drink wine and ale, dance and sing in his wondrous presence.

So 21st century Christians, I am beyond delighted to see what a big, huge deal you’ve made of Christmas. I say, go ahead, deck the halls, in Jesus’ name. Let carols ring! Make delicious food. Throw parties. Fill your homes with strangers. That child of mine seemed to attract the oddest assortment of people to him from day one, so the odder the better, I say.

Give Christmas all you’ve got.

That is to say, give Christmas your full consent. Allow the God who came to earth to come to you, delight you, and maybe even meddle with your life. That’s what I did and look what became of me. I had my turn. Now it’s yours.

Right this way. Why not take the front car? Buckle up. Hands up. Woosh! Joyfully yours, Mary.