

HOW CAN THIS BE?**Mary: From Tragedy To Resilience And Trust**

Even though tragedy and misfortune are an inescapable part of life, it is never welcome and we always hope it strikes someone else. It creates turmoil, self-doubt, anger, and despair. When bad things happen we wonder why: why now? Why me? Explanations or blame won't roll back the clock. It's barely two weeks before Christmas, the season of joy, so why am I speaking about tragedy?!!

Last week I introduced you to some questions that surround Christmas. If you read the accounts of Jesus' birth in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, these questions emerge, though you may easily overlook them. These life questions that we all face in some form, are part of the journey to Christmas. Questions invite us to seek truth and meaning. [If you'd like to go deeper into these questions I suggest this book: Rob Burkhardt, *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery*, United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015]. The first question came from Zechariah, the temple priest in Jerusalem who became the father of John the Baptist. Zechariah and his wife were very advanced in age so when the angel told them that they'd have a son he couldn't believe it. He asked, how can I be sure of this? It's the same question we often ask: Whom can I trust? Who is telling me the truth? In his life's journey he came to see the trustworthiness of God. That is my hope and prayer for you this Christmas.

This week let's consider Mary the mother of Jesus. An angel also visited her and told her something astounding ... well actually frightening. And she asked: How can this be? It's the question we too ask whenever disruption, change of plans, or tragedy comes on the scene. How can this be when I put everything in place, or was minding my own business, or I never hurt anyone, or I'm a good person? Why does this happen to me? It just doesn't make sense.

In our quest to answer Mary's question, I hope you will discover not so much a recipe for avoiding tragedy, but a way of transforming it by allowing God to walk with you. He can convert tragedy into purpose and joy, while filling you with resilience and confidence in the face of trouble.

Good News, Bad News

The angel Gabriel told Mary, *"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High,"* Luke 1:31. Mary was a very ordinary girl, leading an ordinary life until the angel showed up. That's the point, of course.

In response to this astounding pronouncement Mary asked, *"How will this be ... since I am a virgin?"* Luke 1:34. [Being a virgin was synonymous with being unmarried.] We think about the biology involved, while Mary is thinking about the potentially tragic consequences. While we think about the Magnificat, that beautiful song of Mary she sings later (after she fully realizes and accepts God's plan for her), she is thinking about the bad news this announcement brings into her life. An unexplained pregnancy threatened her security, her planned future, possibly even her life. Being pregnant is not something you can hide for very long. Who would believe her story about the angel and being history's only pregnant virgin? (Maybe her cousin Elizabeth would believe her). [We don't really know how long it was between the angel's announcement to Mary and her song of praise to the Lord over that announcement. Long enough, no doubt, to consider the potential disaster her pregnancy could bring.]

Think of your own life: sudden changes in life's plans can throw you off balance. "I didn't see that coming!" "No one will understand how this happened to me!" Tragic changes all too often bring tragic consequences that affect all aspects of your life.

Tragic Consequences

1. **Physical** threat. Mary's body was certainly changed – any pregnant woman can tell you that. Disease, accident, an inherited condition, even creeping old age can weaken our bodies, limiting our mobility and abilities.
2. **Safety and security** threatened. Mary's security of a stable marriage, home, and future were in jeopardy. Being pregnant before marriage made her liable to being disowned, punished, maybe even stoned to death (Lev. 20:10). Think of how a misfortune or misjudgment could snowball on you or someone you know. Unemployment, illness, a divorce, maybe a mental illness, could start a chain of events that could lead to risky behavior, substance abuse, bankruptcy, foreclosure, and homelessness.
3. **Relationships** threatened. Mary's relationships with parents, future husband and his family, and neighbors could be destroyed. Think of the stress that arises from a severe accident, long-term illness, unemployment, or financial crisis ... stress that can break marriages, destroy friendships, and alienate family members. Anger, depression, and self-doubt even self-hatred are the bitter fruit of such stress. In the midst of tragedy a person can feel so alone just when they most need relationships. Psalm 38:11 *"My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away."*
4. **Self-worth** threatened. Her pregnancy changed how Mary saw herself (and how others saw her). The angel's assurance that she was highly favored might be true in heaven, but it didn't look that way on earth.¹ Tragedy has a way of casting doubt on how we think of ourselves. Suffering can feel like divine punishment. Even when it's not your fault you probably feel less confident after a great fall. Psalm 71:11 *"They say, 'God has forsaken him; pursue him and seize him, for no one will rescue him.'"*
5. **Meaning and purpose** threatened. Mary's meaning and purpose was supposed to be found in the simple joys of making a home for her husband and children, surrounded by a community of family and life-long friends. Tragedies have a way of stealing our dreams and our sense of meaning and purpose. And without these, we wither.

Emmanuel

The greatest pain that suffering brings is the feeling of being alone ... everyone's pain and tragedy is his/her own. Sympathetic listening by others helps ... yet no one knows our pain like we do. But that doesn't mean we are alone. The very heart of the Christmas stories is Emmanuel – God with us. Matt.1:22-23.

The Christian faith is quite different from all other religions. Christians confess and affirm that the God of the universe, the very Author of all life, came to earth in human form and was willing to suffer to save humans. [John 3:16.] Christmas really points to Easter. There is no human tragedy, no suffering, no atrocity, and no disaster that catches God by surprise.

Many of us know the stories of Christmas and that Mary's story doesn't end in tragedy. In fact, in due course, she sang, *"... my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,"* Luke 1:47. Yes, the initial announcement would bring difficulties (how do you explain a Holy Spirit pregnancy to Joseph, and everyone else for that matter?) and there would yet be suffering in her role as mother of Jesus – God knew the grief she'd bear at the foot of the cross (Luke 2:34-35). That was the price of taking on the greatest act of parenting in human history and God entrusting her with our greatest treasure.² How will your story end? Are you willing to pay the price for the greatness God can bestow?

¹Rob Burkhardt, *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery* (United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015)

² Rob Burkhardt, "The God Who Is With Us," *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery* (United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015)

Tragedies of biblical proportions - like the fire that destroyed Paradise, CA ... or anything that turns your world upside down - can bring on all the threats to our wellbeing that we've looked at this morning. But such tragedies can also give birth to a renewed trust in God, as told in many of the stories in the Bible. Most of us don't turn to God until all our own efforts have failed or we've lost everything. Sometimes it's a sudden disaster. At other times it's what I call "slow motion tragedy" that unfolds over a long period, with new layers of dismay and trouble appearing as time goes along. Sometimes those kinds of tragedies are more difficult to deal with than short, acute troubles. That's when I remember the words of Isaiah that those who wait upon the Lord are able to "walk and not faint."

Perhaps more than ever we want someone ... we want God to walk with us in those times. Maybe the only thing holding back cries of self-pity and anger, and the poison of bitterness and resentment from entering our souls and our relationships, is knowing that God is there and cares. Maybe the only thing that prevents you seeking relief in addictions and risky behavior which compound the tragedy ... maybe the only thing that keeps us from falling into the abyss of hopelessness is knowing that God has His hand on us. Would you turn to God in time of tragedy? Would you allow God to walk with you in the midst of ongoing troubles? This is the very thing The Mission is teaching and encouraging through its programs for the broken and broken-hearted. But we need to learn the truth too.

Eternal Love

No one seeks out tragedy or desires suffering. Our natural reaction is to push suffering and tragedy as far away as possible, and we often wonder if our misfortune is God's way of punishing us. We cannot see how our terrible situation can bring about anything good. But God's love endures forever and is not diminished by any suffering we endure. How can God's favor and love mingle with sorrow and suffering? The answer to that question reveals the great possibilities and opportunities that lie beyond our gaze.

Mary could have protected the secure and predictable life she had planned, just by saying "No" to the angel. The angel did not coerce or pressure her. Others had refused God's offer, Adam and Eve being the prime example. They lived in an idyllic world but walked away from God, and people have been saying no to God ever since. What can we learn from Mary's "yes" to God?

1. She chose to serve. "*Here I am, the servant of the Lord,*" Luke 1:38. She didn't bargain with God but made herself available to God. Do we exist to serve or to be served? Do we live for our own ends or give ourselves to greater things?
2. She chose to submit to God's will. "*Let it be according to your word*" Luke 1:38. These days we often equate submission with weakness. Mary's submission was a willing submission that accepts the consequences, even if unknown. Can you give yourself to God not knowing what the future may hold? John 10:17-18.
3. She trusted the angel and God who sent him. Trust is precious. Many of us only trust God one drop at a time. Maybe that's because we know ourselves to be not so trustworthy. Mary trusted her body, her baby, and her future to God. How about you? Do you believe that God will make a way for you when life gets difficult? "*But I trust in you, LORD; I say, 'You are my God,'*" Psalm 31:14

It would cost her dearly but she was rewarded with being the mother of the Savior (Luke 1:31-33) and the most celebrated woman in history. Even in tragedy those who trust in the Lord will discover that they are His beloved children. They will know Emmanuel - God is with them - and that is enough.

I had a friend long ago who observed that, "... you can get an arrow in the back at any time. What you do about it is another thing." When tragedy strikes it brings pain and suffering while also revealing who we really are deep down. Character is forged in the fires of adversity. The character emerging from the ashes that brings new life is built in the presence of God. In your adversity, in your comfort, in your daily ho hum life, God is looking for you, don't brush Him off and be struck dumb for 9 months like Zechariah. We can choose what grows in our lives ... even when we're suffering. In the soil of suffering we can plant the seeds of forgiveness, water it with God's grace, and prepare a harvest of hope. God can grow us into blessings that build up. Great men and women invest in a legacy that spreads hope and transforms lives and brings joy. We choose what we make of our suffering and what our suffering makes of us.³ We can let God work in our lives, or we can let our lives work us over.

Like Mary, there is something great for you to do in your life. It is the miracle that God can perform through you, turning your suffering into beauty, forgiveness, strength, and love - something your family and our world needs now more than ever. Even in tragedy, *"...it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose,"* Philippians 2:13. There is a confidence for living in knowing this truth. [Romans 5:3-5.]

My hope this Christmas is that you will realize God's great care for you in all circumstances - whatever circumstances you are going through now. Not only that, my hope is that you will know the deep peace that His presence brings so that even in the midst of trial and tragedy you are able to say as Mary said to the angel Gabriel, *"I am the Lord's servant ... May your word to me be fulfilled"* Luke 1:38. I hope that you will be able to trust that God will bring good out of your bad situation.

Even more so, I hope that some of you will be able to help someone you know who is suffering to know Emmanuel. Knowing God with us brings healing. I'm not talking about just saying, "Oh, don't worry, God's got it all in control." Rather it's being a comforting presence, praying, and when appropriate sharing words of hope. It's a matter of knowing the Lord through your own tragedies.

The word of the Lord brings healing to the afflicted. It is the mystery of God's love mingled with our suffering. Knowing that God knows, God notices, God cares, and is Emmanuel - God with us - makes all the difference in the world. Place your trust in Him.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Romans 8:35,37.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him. Psalm 40:3

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:8

³ Rob Burkhardt, "A Challenging Choice," *Five Questions of Christmas: Unlocking the Mystery* (United Methodist Pub. House, Nashville, TN, 2015)