

# Mary Christmas

## (Matthew 1: 18-24)

So, where are the shepherds? And what about the "multitude of the heavenly host" shining their glory on everyone and breaking into song about God, and salvation, and peace?

Sure, there is an angel. One angel, who sounds more like a meditating attorney in a three-piece suit, speaking in one long sentence which tells Joseph he ought to see this thing through and try to work things out with Mary. And that even happens in a dream. But that seems to fit Matthew's purpose. Matthew isn't interested in the trimmings of Christmas. He wanted his Jewish audience to understand that old prophecy was being fulfilled, and had to explain the role of Joseph in this process. All that other stuff might confuse the facts and keep some Jews from seeing the Christ in Christmas.

As for me, I've always preferred Luke's Christmas: the one with shepherds, and singing angels, and swaddling clothes in the manger. We've all become accustomed to that beautiful Christmas on the cards, with Mary and Joseph, dressed in blue and brown, riding the little donkey down the road in the bright starlight to Bethlehem. We smile at the children as they play the parts of the innkeeper and the camels and those other "stars" of Christmas pageants. We light our candles and whisper-sing "Silent Night," and are so moved by the majesty of it we swear we won't wait till next Christmas Eve to come back to church. Now that's Christmas.

But with apologies to Hallmark, Matthew may have it more correct than we would like. For a few minutes I want to remember how it probably really happened.

The first thing to keep in mind is that even though it happened nearly 2,000 years ago, some things haven't changed. First century eyebrows raised just as easily as 21st century eyebrows. According to the story told, Mary had gone to the well for water. She stood up with the jug, turned around and came face-to-face with a big angel. He had news. It traveled fast. Nazareth was just a small place, perhaps 15 or 20 families living there, and any news traveled quickly. This news would have set a record.

You see, Mary was betrothed. She was kind of married, but not really married. It was

kind of an engagement, but more than an engagement. She and Joseph were not living together yet, but if Joseph would have died, Mary would have been considered a widow. It was a firm and honorable commitment. Mary's news would definitely fall somewhere outside the bounds of acceptable for one betrothed. She would be divorced, and could be stoned.

Fortunately, the angel had that short visit with Joseph and convinced him to honor the betrothal and trust Mary. That could not have been an easy thing to do, considering all the talk down at the Nazareth Tim Horton's every morning. The decree that came along requiring all Jews to return to their town of birth certainly created some problems for everyone, but at least gave the town something new to talk about and gave Mary and Joseph a change of scenery. Mary Christmas.

By the way, did I mention that these are kids we are talking about here? That's right. Joseph is probably 17 or 18 and Mary is closer to 12 or 13. You need to change the picture of those two riding the donkey. Take some of the maturity out of the face we have painted for her and take some of the hair off of his. At that time, Mary was the right age for betrothal and marriage, but today she would be cramming for a chapter test in her seventh or eighth grade Social Studies class.

For reasons we don't need to worry about here, the two of them found themselves on the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That's about 80 miles by air, and twice that by road. You begin in the beautiful Jezreel Valley with its fields of grain and springs of water, go through the mountains of the central highlands with their steep and twisting roads and occasional snow, and end up on the border of the wilderness of Judea with its rugged cliffs and waterless climate that absorbs a quart of water from your body each hour simply by your breathing.

Did I mention Samaritans? Contrary to what their son would teach in a few years, Mary and Joseph knew there was no such thing as a "Good Samaritan." The hatred between Samaritan and Jew went back to Babylonian days, some 500 years earlier. Even now, our now, it is often seen that when a Jew happens to walk across the property of a Samaritan, the owner runs out, throws straw on the footprints, and sets fire to it to burn away any trace of the hated contact. For several nights Joseph sought to find a resting place for his young Jewish "bride" in Samaritan land. Mary Christmas.

And take Mary off that donkey. If they were fortunate enough to have one, Joseph would have been riding, and Mary would have been walking along behind. The old culture is amused by our shock, but it is doubtful that we need to worry about it. Donkeys were "rich-folk" transportation, and these were "poor-folk" travelers. Remember later, when Mary and Joseph take their new son to the temple to present the offerings to God, thanking him for the birth? Leviticus states the sacrifice is to be a lamb, one year old. But, if you cannot afford a lamb, then two doves or pigeons will do. Luke reminds us that Mary and Joseph present the "poor" offering of birds in the place of the lamb. There was probably no donkey either.

And don't dress Mary in that pretty blue robe she posed in for the Christmas card photo. The dye for the color blue came from the murex shell found over near Caesarea Maritima. You poked a pin in the top of the snail shell and out dripped a bit of blue coloring used to make the dye. It took 10,000 shells to fill one thimble-full of dye. It was expensive, and reserved for the rich and royal. Put her in shades of tan, nine-months pregnant, on foot, a long way from home. Mary Christmas.

Ah, Bethlehem! At last a warm meal, a warm bath, and a warm bed. But there was no room. And, there was no innkeeper. The word we have read as "inn" is the same word used later to describe the room Jesus entered to celebrate his last supper. There, it is better translated as "guest chamber." Most homes had a special room that served as the eating and sleeping quarters for guests. Mary and Joseph's family home in Bethlehem apparently had one, too. The family home also apparently had too much family coming back for the census, and there was no room for them in the guest chamber. Fortunately for Mary and Joseph however, many homes around Bethlehem were built up against caves in the hills. The front, manmade part of the house served as the living chambers for the owners, while the cave served as furnace, air conditioner, and a safe place to keep the animals during poor weather. The two sections of the house were separated by a small fence to control where the animals wandered, and against the fence were placed stone mangers so the animals could be fed and watered easily. You can still walk through the small cave that Mary spent the night in. It is a lot prettier now than it was then. The smoke from the oil lamps is gone, and the smell of 2,000 years of incense has finally overcome the smell of sheep and goats and chickens. But that night it was home. A baby was born and placed over in one of those stone mangers to keep the animals from stepping on him. Mary Christmas.

This was probably Mary's Christmas. Knowing these things has begun to change the

way I look at Christmas. I'm not trying to destroy those pretty visions that dance around in our heads. I'm not saying you need to go out and buy drab, depressing cards and mail them with drab, depressing little stamps on them. I just want to be like Matthew and cut away some of the tinsel to see what this Christmas thing really means. It wasn't easy then, and still isn't now.

As we think about the story this way, it engages us and touches us where we live our own lives. Joseph was told that this baby would be “God with Us” Emmanuel. Matthew’s story gives us some insight into what this means. Rather than the Hallmark Christmas Card, where every detail is sentimentalized we are invited to see in this Christmas scene two people living in the world facing perplexing problems. Theirs was a life shaped by their encounter with Jesus. Such an encounter does not lead us to living our lives in some idealized existence separated from the challenges that mark ordinary life. But the life of Jesus when it intersects with our lives allows us to live life with a purpose, direction and meaning that will allow us to with Mary ponder in our hearts what His life means to us.

May the Christmas Story as told by Matthew help you to see that this Christmas Celebration is not meant for the yearly Hall Mark cards but for the daily living of life in a world where with Jesus’ mother and father we can live as those who are trusting in God even though the journey can be long, and at times exhausting.

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