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Christmas IN Bethlehem

I started watching Christmas movies in October because that's when my favorite channel started airing them. Since October I have been daily inundated with the perfect characters with the perfect wardrobes (complete with hair and makeup) living out the perfect romances to round out their most perfect Christmases. I can't lie, my binge watching led to an extremely stressful and disappointing weekend of decorating my own home for the Christmas season. My children did not like my choice of classic Christmas movies or music playing in the background as I tried to set the stage for our "perfect" day of trimming the trees. There was no cookie baking, making of popcorn strings, or playful tosses of tinsel. No choruses of carols being sung or kisses under the mistletoe. No, my Christmas season began with fights, eager little hands grabbing and throwing decorations out of their boxes in order to "see it all", and stifling panic attacks. I spent a significant portion of time trying to protect ornaments from the throws of toddler tantrums and diving to catch the ones that had been hung on the tips of the branches as they fell to their death. In the movies the characters can deck every hall, trim the tree, make gingerbread houses, hang lights and basically have an entire 2,000 square foot winter wonderland within a five-minute montage. My tree was barely decorated within two hours. My Christmas experience thus far has been far from perfect and I know I'm not the only one. The problem is that the stories being told in these Christmas movies are far from relatable. Most suburban housewives, while we may have fast paced jobs, have not lived the high demanding lifestyle of a big city corporate world. Most of us have never been stranded in a small town a week before Christmas, although we may like the idea of being forced to slow down and smell the pine. Some of us may have experienced whirlwind romances, but, we don't usually meet and declare someone to be our soulmate within a time span of four days. The most devastating part for me is that I live in Texas where having a White Christmas would be roughly the same as spotting Big Foot (does it exist if you've never seen it?).

There is one Christmas story, however, that is completely relatable if we take the time to relate to it. It is even relatable to the romantic Christmas movies that have built a following that almost equals the following of its own. There is no Christmas story like the original and it has all the same main highlights. Single girl on track to living out her best life. Travel is involved as well as an unexpected stop in the middle of the trip with no place to stay. There is a romance between your two favorite characters. It has an unexpected plot twist complete with an anti-climactic misunderstanding between the couple and the truth is then revealed, in this case by an angel, reuniting them. Peace and harmony are restored, and the Christmas story ends with the greatest love in the history of the world. We may stop at the words "virgin birth" and think of a miraculous Christmas story that we could never actually relate to. But let's take some time together this season and discover that it does relate to our lives more than any other story ever could. Over the next few weeks we will dive into a slow-paced study of three different pieces in the story of the birth of Christ and reflect on how we can relate them to our own lives.

Cue the Single Girl

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her."

Luke 1: 26-38 NIV

Every good story has a hero or heroine, and the story of Christ's birth definitely delivers. This is the ultimate 'single girl finds herself in a unique situation right at Christmas time' plot. Her situation is so unique that no one would ever believe her without divine intervention. A teenage girl betrothed to, let's assume, the handsomest bachelor in town. She's probably planning a simple wedding and dreaming of their life together; the kids they will have, maybe their status in the community. Then she is visited by an angel. Now, we read this and it doesn't seem like a big deal. Most stories in the Old Testament are filled with the voice of God and angels of the Lord appearing. Let's not ignore the fact that that's what they were to Mary too, stories in the Tanakh (this would be like a Jewish form of the Old Testament). A visit from an angel was not normal for her. She might have thought that she was dreaming or maybe had some bad figs at dinner that night. When she realized none of that was true she was terrified, as I would be. Now let's forget the terrifying angel standing before her for a minute. He now tells her that she will have a virgin birth and be the mother....of the son of God. I would not be surprised if in that moment there were crickets chirping and nothing else for quite a while. But this teenage heroine of our story wraps her mind around it and says, "may your word to me be fulfilled (Luke 1:38 NIV)".

Some of us are mothers and we have experienced firsthand sharing the news of our pregnancy with the father and other loved ones. Some of us also know the fear associated with a teen pregnancy or of sharing the news with family and friends (at any age) when it will not be well received. I would even venture to say that there are those of us whom have tried to lie about the identity of the father. None of us, however, could ever imagine the threat of being stoned as the pregnancy is discovered or even of holding to the claim of a virgin birth. Joseph could have and should have left her high and dry. Her parents could have called her a disgrace to the family and thrown her out. But God knew that, just as Mary would never

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understand what was happening to her without prior “heavenly” knowledge, neither would Joseph. Matthew chapter one recounts Joseph’s divine marriage counseling, so to speak, and how he came to accept Jesus as his own son.

So far, we have discussed the UN-relatable found in this, but we don’t have to look that far to discover what IS relatable. Let’s start with something small. When was the last time that you were uncertain about what your spouse or even just a close friend told you they were planning on doing? Perhaps a new path or direction that they felt led to follow, or a decision that they were making. Did you trust that they were listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and go along with it? Or no? Can you imagine how different the circumstances would have been for Mary if Joseph were not standing in faith and in agreement with her. She could have been the subject of ridicule and become an outcast in her own home, save the one single person that said, “I believe you, let’s do this”. Let’s flip that for a harder question. When was the last time that you were faced with something and needed just one person to stand with you? I think the most relatable aspect of this portion of the story would be the fear that Mary and Joseph both felt. The angel of the Lord told both Mary and Joseph not to be afraid. The phrase “fear not” is in the Bible 365 times. God knows that fear is prevalent in our lives and repeatedly uses His word to combat it. As society changes, it seems we have more and more to fear of the world. As we progress and change, we have more and more things to fear in our jobs, our marriages and relationships, our children and just from life itself. How do we let this fear affect us? Do we let it cripple us, or do we trust the Lord our God like Mary and Joseph did?

Reflection:

Has God ever presented you with something that you were not exactly excited to jump on board with? What was it?

Why were you not keen on the idea?

What was your response to God?

Mary told the angel “May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38). Out of her obedience to the Lord (and trust, I might add) she birthed something that changed the course of the world. She birthed the Savior. What is God asking you to “birth” for Him in your life?

In your family?

In your
community?

God, we thank you for one teenage girl who trusted you enough to say, “may your word to me be fulfilled”. We thank you for what that obedience birthed in our lives and that it shows us how much you love us and ultimately allows us to be with You in heaven for eternity. We pray that we would be able to follow the example that Mary laid out for us in being willing to be obedient to Your call on our lives, even if we do it afraid.



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Sleigh Ride vs Donkey Ride

¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:1-20 (NIV)

This is the part of the story that is most like the Christmas movies that I have been watching since October. This is the part where the main character(s) go on a trip (for business, not pleasure), get stuck, essentially have nowhere to go, and meet a bunch of super friendly and overly hospitable people. This is the part of the story where their lives are changed forever. I have been on plenty of road trips, plenty of bad road trips at that. I've had brakes go out, tires blow, head on collisions (all different trips, by the way), and just generally overall bad trips. I've even had unfortunate road trips while pregnant. But the vehicles were always at least comfortable, and I had a bed waiting for me to crawl into at the end of it. Forget vintage trucks or sleigh rides or anything convenient, the mode of transportation for Mary and Joseph was a donkey. Mary didn't just ride on a donkey; she rode the donkey for four or five days while she was nine months pregnant. I have heard a lot of old wives' tales about inducing labor and I'm shocked that riding a donkey has not made the list. Is it really that big of a surprise that after the stress of travel, the bumpy journey on the back of an animal, and how far along she was, she went into labor? Not really. Here's another aspect that I did not find surprising: Joseph didn't think that far ahead. Sure, he had probably made the trip before, and he may or may not have been able to find lodging. I am married to a wonderful man who, for the most part, is excellent at planning things. But on trips that he is familiar with, he tends to forget to consider the fact that I and/or our kids will be with him this time. He doesn't always remember to factor in the number of times that we will need to stop for snacks,

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to use the restroom or to stop the screaming because a huge bug got into the car. I would guess that while Joseph himself would have been fine sleeping in a stable for the night, the thought of having his wife potentially birth their child in one never entered his mind. Auntie and Uncle have plenty of space, right? Unless the entire family is suddenly in town, which they were. So, let's add to the fear of giving birth for the first time by having it happen outside in a stable, just the two of them and maybe the donkey.

Now here is another area where the Christmas movies line up with the birth of Christ, strangers show up out of nowhere and bring them all kinds of weird things that they've never had before. Remember all those big city people that end up in a small town and for some reason have never decorated a tree or had a certain kind of hot cocoa or Christmas cookie? It's like that, but with frankincense and myrrh. That one trip changed their lives. It led to them never being the same after meeting that one person: the son of the Most High. He shall be called Jesus.

We have all found ourselves on a journey at some point in our lives. Rarely does that journey look the way we think it should, or even turn out the way that we expect it to. There are bumps in the road, roadblocks, unexpected stops. We get uncomfortable and complain about how the trip is going and vow to never do another trip like that again. But it's a journey that God uses to change us forever. Mary and Joseph's journey to meet their baby didn't look the way they expected. What did your journey to meet Jesus Christ, son of the Most High, look like? How has He changed your life?

Reflection:

Have you ever taken a trip that did not turn out the way that you planned? _____

What happened? In what way was it not what you expected? _____

Looking back, would you change that experience? Why or why not?

Has there ever been a "journey" in life that God called you to that did not go the way that you anticipated? _____

What did you learn from those road bumps that you encountered?

Lord, we thank you that we don't always see the end of the road when we begin our journey. We know that the unexpected things that happen along our way are the things that you use to grow us and equip us for the next part of our story. Thank you for being with us and walking beside us as we go. We are ready and willing to start walking in the direction you have called us to.



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The Love of Christmas

“an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).”

Matthew 1:20-23(NIV)

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners”

Isaiah 61:6 (NIV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16 (NIV)

This is always my favorite part of the movies. Any movie, really, not just a cheesy Christmas one. The part where the two people realize that they are in love. When they meet in the beginning of the story, there is usually an Elizabeth Bennet/Mr. Darcy situation going on. They argue through a portion of the show until they slowly realize that they drive each other crazy in the most wonderful way. Other times there is a set of childhood friends, one of which has kindled an unrequited love for years on end. It takes up until the last five minutes of the movie before the other realizes that they truly do desire more than friendship and profess their love thus solidifying the happiest of ever after's. We are relational people by nature so, naturally, we need other people. We need love. We crave it. So much so (for women, at least) that it brings us great joy to watch these stories play out over and over. When I sit back and really think about it, I get frustrated that the stories end at the profession of love. When will one of these Christmas movies portray a main character couple that is ten years and a few kids in and trying to survive but still love each other madly with a twitterpated kind of love? There are probably plenty of single women out there claiming the same frustrations for their own demographic. My true frustration in all these love stories, however, is this; I don't need romances about finding a soulmate because I already found my soulmate and I found him when I

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was five. You see, we are indeed relational people who crave and seek out love. After all, we were created in the image of the one who craves OUR love above all else. Our God is a relational God and therefore he created man and woman in his image in order to be in relationship with them. But there is one who has been jealous of that relationship from the beginning of creation, and it did not take him long to begin trying with everything in his extremely limited powers to destroy it.

Cue the great misunderstanding that momentarily separates the couple, the fall of man and our separation from God. Here lies the most relatable aspect of all. In every single one of the Christmas movies or any Romcom/Romance genre of story there is a great misunderstanding that momentarily ends the romance. The characters don't speak for a period, some refuse to even see the other person or leave town altogether in an effort to avoid them. Then, in a chain of events, the truth is revealed, true love is professed, and the couple is happily reunited. In Genesis, Satan incited the great misunderstanding between God and man. "Honey he only told you not to eat that because he's trying to hold you back from your true potential". Eve and Adam (of his own accord) eat the fruit and begin a period of separation from God. Don't forget that in every misunderstanding there is also a chain of events that reveals the truth and reunites the couple. The Christmas story, the birth of Christ, begins that chain of events. God desires that relationship with us so much so that he began the series of events himself. He loves YOU so irrevocably that HE began the process to repair the relationship with mankind. He loves you so much that he went to great lengths to get you back. That chain of events ended with Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the grave. For the sole purpose of reuniting us with our soulmate. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV). The baby born in the manger that Christmas night, he is our greatest love story of all.

Reflection:

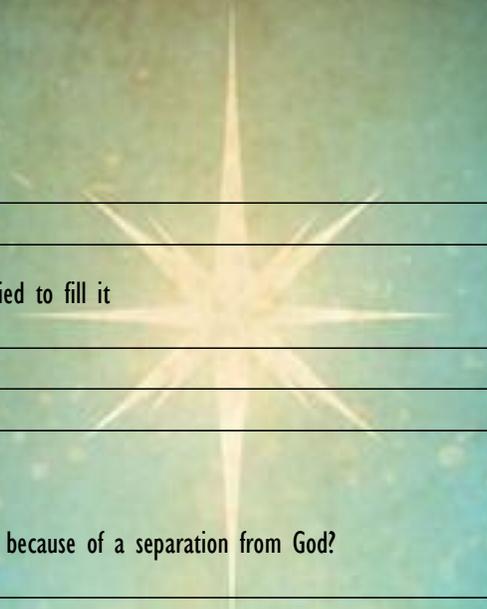
Have you ever believed the lie that God did not have your best interest in mind? That he simply did not care for you?

Has there ever been an event in your life, a "great misunderstanding" that caused you to separate yourself from God?

What happened?

How did that separation effect you mentally? Spiritually?

Have you ever felt a void inside that nothing has been able to fill?



What kinds of things/ who have you tried to fill it with?

Is it possible that the void was created because of a separation from God?

How does it feel to know that God is willing to move heaven and earth to repair that void?

God, we thank you for Christmas. We thank you that the birth of Christ was the first step in a chain of events to bring us back into relationship with you. We pray that as we celebrate Christmas this year, we would not forget that the birth of that baby in the manger represents the love of a God who would do anything to bring us back to him.

If you have not accepted Christ as your savior and allowed him to repair that void and separation from the God who desperately loves you and you would like to discuss and/or pray with someone, please contact us through social media or at thesendhelppodcast@gmail.com



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