

**BARELY A RIPPLE**  
**Christmas Eve**  
(Source: *God Stories* by H. Stephen Shoemaker)

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Just a teenage girl – Mary. Engaged to a man named Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth who is much older than she. One day she is doing her chores, as usual. And then a stranger suddenly appeared.

“Hail, favored one of God,” the angel said. “The Lord is with you.”

And that was only the beginning of the wonders.

Did Gabriel’s wings unfold in gleaming green and copper, purple and gold? Did they beat slowly, casting rainbows like a prism around the room? Did Mary feel the soft breeze move across her face like a benediction?

“The Lord is with you..... with you..... with you. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and call his name Jesus.”

“This can’t be,” said Mary. “I don’t have a husband.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the angel assured. “The power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child will be called holy, the Son of God. Mary, don’t you know,” the angel said, “with God nothing is impossible.”

If you say yes, Mary – if you say yes – within your power is that of choosing to conceive a child who chooses you.

Mary answered yes. She said, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done according to your word.”

And then the spirit that once moved across the face of the deep and created the heavens and the earth overshadowed Mary’s flesh and created a child of spirit and flesh named Jesus, which means “God will save us from our sins.”

The miracle of God becoming flesh. The humanity of God.

Enter Joseph. The engagement to Mary was, perhaps for him, an oddity from the beginning. He looked old enough to be her big brother or, on some tired days, even her father. Perhaps he never expected her to say yes when he proposed. But she did. And he found a new spring in his step.

Old familiar aches and pains seemed momentarily to disappear. The neighbors perhaps chuckled at them. “Hey, Joe. You’re supposed to be building cradles, you carpenter – not robbing them.”

Luke tells us about Mary, but Matthew tells us about Joseph.

She was found with child – Matthew begins the story. Her talk of angels and the Holy Spirit was not reassuring to Joseph. He was a common man, not given to mystic visions or poetic flights. Miracles made no sense. He could only suspect the obvious, and perhaps thought about having her stoned, and the child with her. Instead, he decided to quietly dissolve the relationship. But at night, as he lay in bed – sick of heart and sick of body – he fell asleep. As he slept, God sent a dream.

The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to wife. The child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and Joe, you name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin.”

It all seems so fragile to me now – the conditions surrounding God becoming man. God trusting His Son’s life and the world’s salvation into our human hands. We need the trustful submission of a teenage girl, the bodily processes of gestation and birth, the trustful obedience of a man who had a dream.

Nine months pass, and we return to the familiar cadence of Luke’s story.

“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” Luke’s following words – memorized by hundreds of children in every Christmas pageant in every church – “And she brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn.”

So Mary and Joseph find shelter in a shepherd’s cave. God’s Son born in a stable – not a palace. Not even a Holiday Inn. But a simple abode used to protect animals from the elements. The Son of Man – God’s Christ who later as an itinerant preacher would have no place to lay His head would first lay His head in a manger, a rough feeding trough for animals, a makeshift crib for a makeshift night.

Where you would have suspected angels, there were only flies. Where you would have expected heads of state, there were only heads of cattle and a few barn mice. And thus, in the little town of Bethlehem that one silent night, the royal birth of God’s Son tiptoed quietly by as the world slept.

The little Lord Jesus. Elongated head from the constricting journey. Light skin as the pigment would take days or even weeks to surface. The Son of the Most High God tied to a lowly Jewish girl by an umbilical cord.

The baby chokes and coughs, and Joseph instinctively turns him over and clear his throat. Then he cries.

Joseph must have been tired and Mary exhausted. Silent and full of wonder. Mary, too, ponders and tries to sort out the madness of what has happened to her. Together they stare in awe, like all proud parents, at the baby Jesus, whose heavy eyelids begin to close. It's been a long journey, and the little king is tired.

So, with barely a ripple of notice, God stepped into the warm lake of humanity – without protocol and without pretension.

The scene shifts to the countryside where the shepherds were keeping their flocks in the night. Seen in Judaism as thieves, Luke's shepherds are not the rosy-cheeked choir boys with treble voices, fake beards, and papier mache crooks. They were more like the guys with the week's stubble of beard who paint houses by day and drink their way from bar to bar by night. Their music was more Merle Haggard than it was J. S. Bach.

If the birth of the holy babe was not unusual enough already, can you believe the first witnesses to this coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords were shepherds? The first to see God with flesh on – people the law of the land would not even allow to be witnesses in courts of law because everybody knows they are liars and thieves. They are ceremonially unclean.

They were frightened by the appearance of angels. "Don't be afraid." After the first words of the angel, they covered their eyes, but slowly began to peek through their fingers. "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people everywhere. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." They ran all the way to Bethlehem, as Luke tells the story.

Time passes, and the next scene flashes forward – to visitors from beyond the rising sun. Not only the smell of the livestock exhibit show at the state fair which accompanied the birth of Jesus, but now the smell of frankincense and myrrh, and the vision of gold.

It's an unusual story. Certainly not the way I would have scripted the entrance of God's Son. It would have been Rome or Jerusalem. And it certainly wouldn't have been Mary. It would have been Caiphas's daughter – the daughter of the high priest. It wouldn't have been in a barn but, rather, in a palace. I would never have scripted the lowly scene.

When you visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem today, you have to bow low to enter the place where they say Jesus was born. As you're in the tiny room that looks for all the world like a cave, candles are lit to break through the darkness. And if you listen carefully, you can almost hear a young woman offer, "Here, would you like to hold him?" That God would bend so low that we could take Him into our arms and cradle our Creator, that we might be touched by His holy light and follow it and bear it to the world.

This is the wonder of wonders called Christmas – the Nativity of Jesus.

How about you? Are you ready for that baby Jesus? Are you ready to let Him shape your life? Shape your home? Are you ready to bend low enough to allow Him to shape your heart?

Oh God, it is tonight that we wait. It is tonight that we celebrate. Not to bust open packages to find Barbie dolls, board games, leaf blowers or lace. It is not even the fellowship of family or the taste of turkey that makes us sit, even now, on the edge of our seat. It is for you, O God, to come to us. Thank you for this blessed night.