

WHAT'S IN A STORY: Obstacles

We're talking about the Christmas story. Timely, I bet we agree. Last week we talked about the anticipation that's in the story, particularly in the prophetic declarations that God would do something mighty through a child. But we added an important point last week: We said that if the story of Jesus is to continue, if it is to have life in the modern age, we must be among its modern prophets. We must tell the world that God WILL act, God WILL intervene, and Jesus IS God's gift to us.

Today we talk about another aspect of the story - resistance, or more accurately, obstacles. Let's take a mental tour through the Christmas story to identify potential roadblocks:

There was Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. An angel told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child, even though they had been unable to conceive. Zechariah's doubts about that part of the story could have been a real obstacle. We get a feel for how much of an obstacle he could have been when we note that the angel shut him up, muted him, until his son was born.

Then there was Joseph, the guy engaged to Mary who would be the mother of Jesus. Mary got pregnant without Joseph's participation, which led Joseph to decide to end their engagement. But an angel told him in a dream to follow through with the marriage, because the pregnancy was God's doing, and that God had great plans for the child to be born. Joseph consented, but had he not, HE could have been a big obstacle in the story.

Then there was Mary. An angel told her, you're going to get pregnant. Mary wondered how that was possible since she hadn't done what people usually do to get pregnant. She consented once hearing the angel's response, but boy could Mary have been an obstacle to the Christmas story.

Other characters. The shepherds. Out in the field, doing their thing. Then came some singing angels to whom the shepherds responded with joy and a run to Bethlehem to see the newborn Jesus. But they didn't have to react that way! They could have said we're all tired, so those angels we hear singing are figments of our imagination. The shepherds, like Mary and Joseph and Zechariah could have been an obstacle.

How about the wise men? They didn't have to follow the star. They could have passed it off as some astronomical oddity. They could have stayed home. They could have been an obstacle.

King Herod tried to be an obstacle, didn't he? Fragile of ego, when he heard that the King of the Jews had been born, he sent the wise men on a spy mission to find him. The wise men COULD have gone back to Herod and said, if you want to find the child, turn right on Avenue of the Cities, third manger on the left. But they didn't; they went home a different way. The wise men weren't an obstacle. Herod wasn't an obstacle - though he certainly tried - even ordered male children under the age of two killed in an attempt to rid himself of what he perceived to be the newborn threat to his crown. But that failed, too, because an angel told Joseph and Mary to take their new born son to Egypt to avoid Herod's threats.

The point of that run through a list of possible obstacles in the Christmas story is not to note how many there were, but rather to note what they all had in common: They were all people, human beings, like you and me. Basically every obstacle to God's successful intervention in human life through the birth of Jesus was him- or herself a human being. It wasn't weather conditions. It wasn't the state of the economy. It was people, like you and me.

That's not a surprise, but it's worth calling attention to. Remember when Peter tried to get Jesus not to go to Jerusalem because Peter feared for Jesus' safety? Jesus said to him, get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. What did that mean? It meant Peter was a potential obstacle to Jesus fulfilling his God-given destiny.

Or Saul, arresting and persecuting Christians. You know the story. Saul's on the way to Damascus to arrest more Christians when he's struck by a blinding light, from which Jesus asks him, why are you persecuting me? Translation: Why are you being an obstacle?

The word I have for you today has to do with what can get in the way of our having a blessed Christmas this year. And it's not something silly like whether we say Merry Christmas! Politicians love to say, "We can't say merry Christmas! We have to say happy holidays! And that's not right!" Well, no. No one will stop you from saying Merry Christmas, and no one will question your Christianity if you say happy holidays, because the words we use to greet each other are not the obstacle. We are.

And it's not the weather. I was blowing and raking leaves in December, for goodness' sake. When that happens, it can't be beginning to look a lot Christmas! Leaves on trees. Grass still green. The appearance of the landscape, the temperature of the air, the leaves that fell after the city came by for the last time to suck up your leaves - if you live in Moline, you know what I mean. None of those is an obstacle to Christmas. We are.

- When we focus on the gifts we give to each other rather than the gift God gave to us, that's an obstacle
- When we allow the busyness of the season to distract us from worship, from daily quiet and devotional time, from seeking God in the ways that work best for us. When we allow that busyness to take us off message, off service. That's why it's so good that we're going to make another Helmets of Hope supply delivery soon, in the middle of the Christmas season, why we had a team of people ringing the Salvation Army bell yesterday, why we're going caroling next Saturday. So we can stay on message: God gives to us in the Christ child. In response, we give.
- We're the obstacles to a blessed Christmas when we allow our culture's crass materialism to take our attention away from the gift about the be born. During my shift on bell yesterday at Walmart, as I'm sure was true for all of our team members, the parking lot was packed, and customers who entered bare handed often existed with shopping carts filled with toys and tvs and assorted other season's greetings. When my shift ended, I walked through the store - packed aisles, special item displays every few feet, the store a pulsating witness to the stuff our culture has come to link to this time of year. As people who tell the story of Jesus, we know that stuff can be a serious obstacle.

We're the obstacles. People are the obstacles. The good news is that means we have some say. We don't HAVE to be an obstacle. Just as Mary decided to believe the angel, and the shepherds decided to run to Bethlehem, and the wise men decided to follow the star, we can this week decide to stay on course and on message. Shop for gifts if you need to. Watch the seasonal tv specials if you must. But don't let anyone or anything change the focus of your heart. Like a laser beam stay focused this week on one gift from the one God, for all people, including you.

Don't be an obstacle to the real Christmas. Be a witness.