

## The Birth of Jesus

By the time of Jesus' birth, God—prophetically speaking—had been silent 400 years

- Malachi, last of the prophets, had spoken God's last words: *See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me...*
- the Jews who wished to had returned from captivity in Babylon, discovering they were no longer an independent nation but a very minor presence among much larger empires
- first, Alexander and the Greeks, bent on creating a world united by Greek language and culture
- then the Romans, equally bent on creating a world dominated by Rome
  
- some Jews—the Sadducees—prospered...
  - vested in maintaining the status quo at all costs, they wielded political and economic power disproportionate to their relatively small number
- the Pharisees, likewise few in number, and convinced Judaism as a way of life was under attack, had a circle-the-wagons mentality
  - the Mosaic law was to be interpreted and lived literally
  - indeed, the law itself often seemed more important to the Pharisees than the human beings for whom the law was created
- all Jews, in general, felt besieged, oppressed...robbed by foreigners...people of different nationalities, different faiths...of the historical strength and significance they'd once felt
- so all awaited the Messiah...a Savior
  - one sent by God to destroy their enemies, restore them to what they regarded as their rightful, God-ordained place as the Chosen Ones
  - no longer would they be fearful, no longer would they feel besieged
  - power and honor and glory would again be theirs

Then, in the midst of the fears and the anxiety and the expectations of past glories restored, God finally spoke

- an angel is sent to a small town called Nazareth, to a girl named Mary, to tell her, you will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God
  - we know very little about Mary but, given the fact she was engaged to be married to a carpenter—a semi-skilled laborer named Joseph—she, too, was undoubtedly working class
  - which, in the socio-economic structure of society at that time, was decidedly near the bottom of the food chain
- and, given the typical age at which working class Jewish girls of that time married, she was likely no older than 13

- we know even less about Joseph...he was older, presumably, than Mary...probably in his early 20s
- working class, as we said, but also, all things considered, amazingly understanding
  - discovering Mary was pregnant and therefore assuming as anyone faced with such a situation would that Mary had been unfaithful to him, he decided to end the engagement quietly that Mary not face a very public disgrace
  - yet, when he, too, receives an angelic visitation and learns the truth, he marries her anyway and does not consummate the relationship until after Mary gives birth

It's important to try to put ourselves in this scenario if we're to appreciate it fully

- if you're a female, remember when you were 13
- imagine you are barely even physically able to conceive, let alone carry a baby to term
- you are promised to a man whom you've not yet married
- the disgrace and sin of out-of-wedlock pregnancy is such that Levitical law prescribes death by stoning
- and you become pregnant
  - if you're a male, consider being in your very early 20s, and the girl to whom you're engaged becomes pregnant and you know you're not the father...
  - and when you ask her, how did this happen, whom were you with, she tells you, I'm pregnant by the Holy Spirit
    - I am carrying and will give birth to the Son of God*
  - what would *you* have thought? how would *you* have reacted?
  - even if you were visited by an angel who verified your fiance's story, might you still have thought: we are not royalty, we are not Kings and Queens...I am a poor, working class laborer and Mary a poor, working class girl...why would God choose *us* to bring the Messiah into the world?

And when the time comes, the time for the Messiah to be born, you're not home, you're on the road

- Mary does not give birth to the Son of God in the comfort of a warm bed but on the floor, in the filth and squalor of a room where animals live
- gives birth alone—no other woman who might have experience in delivering babies, no midwife, no physician...just Joseph...and, presumably, the animals
- and, having birthed the child herself, Mary wraps him, literally, in rags...no soft blanket, no little blue knit cap for his head...*rags*
- and having wrapped the Son of God in rags, Mary lays him down the only place she can find...no crib, no bed, she puts him in the trough from which the animals eat
- and she names her son as the angel instructed: *Jesus*...which means, *Savior*

Jesus was not merely a child born in a stable, away from home, the lower class son of lower class parents

- Jesus was also a refugee, forced as a child to flee for his life from his homeland to a foreign country (see Matthew 2:13-18)

- a Jew...God's Chosen People, yes, but, historically, a people despised, rootless and dispersed...in many ways, like gypsies

  - a people, in the beginning, made up of outcastes and aliens

  - rag-tag groups of people who fit, who belonged nowhere else, gathered together by God and set apart as his Chosen

- a *Palestinian Jew*, born in Palestine, a land destined to be conquered, occupied, and reconquered...for all its holiness, a place throughout much of its history, of war and suffering

- a Palestinian Jew who, once he begins his earthly ministry, is homeless

- an itinerant teacher, he wanders from place to place, depending upon the hospitality of other people to feed him, to clothe him, to give him a place to rest, a place to sleep

- he had little or no money, owned no property, material possessions limited to the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet

- he was an illegitimate child and, by the standards of the time, an ingrate...a shiftless bum

  - as the first-born male child it was his responsibility to stay home, assume the family business, and provide for his parents

  - yet he abandons them, leaves them, to disappear into the Judean wilderness only to reappear in his hometown, in the synagogue, to announce his anointing as the One about whom the prophet Isaiah spoke

  - One sent by God, not to destroy Israel's enemies...not to restore the Jews to a God-ordained place as the Chosen Ones

  - not to ensure that power and honor and glory would again be theirs

  - but to preach good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, release to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19)