



Pictures of Christmas

Mary: A Picture of Surrender

Can you imagine Mary's pain during the weeks before the birth of Jesus? For us, Advent is a time of celebration. Children are making Christmas lists. Parents are setting up trees and wrapping presents. Choirs are rehearsing Christmas cantatas. Pastors are preparing for the biggest Sunday of the year.

But Mary.... Mary spends the weeks before the birth hiding from the stares of her neighbors. These are difficult weeks for Mary, a pregnant teenager in a small town. Everyone knows everything. Imagine the talk: "Did you hear the news? Mary is pregnant! It must be Joseph. Isn't it a disgrace? And from such good families! But then, those are the ones who usually go bad. So sad!" Mary faces a life of shame.

Mary is from Nazareth, a small town in the commercial area of Galilee. Nazareth was of total insignificance. It was not known for anything. It was not a particularly beautiful town; it had no great importance in Israel's history; it had no significance in the Jewish faith. Later, Nathanael will ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Mary is a "nobody from nowhere." But a "nobody" who surrenders completely to God is somebody in His kingdom.

Imagine this young girl's shock when an angel appears and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." Mary asks the obvious question. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answers, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

Mary's answer to this startling announcement is remarkable. In a phrase that beautifully communicates her spirit of submission, Mary says, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." Lord, I will do whatever you ask.

Mary's story continues with the birth of the baby in Bethlehem. As we read this story, we are tempted to make it into a Christmas card: a beautiful girl in a white robe sitting in a stable that has been scrubbed clean for the Christmas pageant. None of the ugly parts of the stable are visible. There's a halo over her head. Everything looks comfortable and peaceful. Those images make a beautiful Christmas card, but they're not very realistic.

The real story involves a difficult trip to Bethlehem - days on a donkey in the last stages of pregnancy. It involves arriving in a crowded town, only to discover there no place to stay. And it involves the trauma of birth not in a comfortable hospital surrounded by professional caregivers, but in the corner of a home - the place where the animals are kept. It means giving birth alone with little help from anyone. That's the real picture of Christmas. Mary has learned to live in complete submission to God's will.

The cost of Mary's submission will continue. Eight days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph take the baby to the temple for the rites of purification. Simeon takes the baby in his arms and prays a prayer of blessing. He then turns to Mary and warns her, "A sword will pierce your soul."

Life for Mary will never be easy after this birth. She will endure the whispers of neighbors. As her son reaches adulthood, she will hear the rude comments, "He thinks he is the Messiah? Jesus - the carpenter's son!?" Even Jesus' brothers will reject him.

As Jesus begins to minister, Mary will hear reports of miracles, but she will also hear news of growing opposition from the religious leaders. The day will come when she will stand in the crowd and watch as her son dies one of the most painful deaths man has ever devised. A sword will pierce her soul.

During our Christmas preparations, we should remember that Christmas required a young lady to surrender fully to God's will. Yes, God's plan is always best – but His plan is sometimes painful. Christmas asks us to surrender completely our will to God's will. In this Christmas season, we should join Mary in praying, "Father, I willingly submit to your will and your plan. Let it be according to your word."