

When Luke came to my house to convince me to tell my story, I didn't say anything, for a long time. It triggered so many flash backs: the time Gabriel spoke to me, the first time I held my husband Joseph, the first time I saw Jesus' face, his first miracle... and then...

(her voice trails, eyes close, we know what she's thinking. So difficult)

the death of my firstborn son. I, teenager, young mother, widow, and then, the mature woman you see me now. In a flash. So I smiled, and turned him down. Nobody would believe my story, so what's the use to tell it.

Luke showed me some of his early writings about the miracles of Jesus. And he convinced me that he might be able to comprehend an incomprehensible story. So, for the very first time, I told him things that nobody had ever heard, except my husband, Joseph. Things that I had treasured in my heart for many decades. I'm pleased that he was able to choose some of my story to complete his book. You may have noticed that only Luke wrote many of the events surrounding the birth stories of John and Jesus.

Luke started his story with my cousin, Elizabeth, because that's how I started my story. Elizabeth...my most favorite cousin. She was older than I, much older, so I thought of her like an older sister and best friend all wrapped into one. She had been married and childless for many years, but she and her husband were certain they would have a child to bless their marriage. My earliest memories of Elizabeth are listening to her talk about the son she would have.

Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah... they were both descendants of Aaron, so their son would qualify to be a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem, just as Zechariah was. But the years went by, and they had no children. I prayed for them, every day. My heart just broke for her.

Then, Elizabeth came running to my house. I had never seen her run before, so I was scared to hear her news. She finally caught her breath, and she said, "He can no longer talk! Zechariah has been struck dumb." I said, "That is horrible news." She smiled, "No! That is wonderful news."

She went on to explain that Zechariah had gone to Jerusalem and had his one life-long opportunity to burn incense at the altar. While doing so, the angel Gabriel had come to tell him that he, Zechariah, would soon have a son. When he didn't believe the angel, he was struck dumb. Now Elizabeth believed the angel. She remembered the story of Sarah, and was not

going to laugh in unbelief about getting pregnant at an old age.¹ And they started trying that very afternoon. Even though she was quite old, they were going to have a son.

Sure enough, Elizabeth soon got pregnant. She went into seclusion, and I'll talk about that a little later, but she took care of herself in every way she could. In the course of time, she had a healthy, happy baby boy. Her lifelong dream had been fulfilled. We were all ecstatic. And, when her husband acted in faith, his voice was returned.

Even though Zechariah groomed their son, John, to be a priest, it soon became obvious that he was destined for a different life. He loved to learn the Scriptures, but he dwelt on the need for Israel to repent and turn back to God. Where most people saw the Jewish leaders as righteous, John saw them as sinful and corrupt. He wanted everyone, everywhere to change their ways. Sometimes he would go into the wilderness for days at a time to fast and pray about it. The last time I saw John, he was wearing camel skin clothes and had that dreamy-eyed prophet look...which is what he turned out to be.

Okay, so back to the seclusion. Well, it was six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy that both of our lives changed. And again, it was the angel Gabriel who announced the news.

I lived in Nazareth, a small village, less than 150 people. I was down at the town water well late one morning drawing water and praying about Elizabeth's baby and my upcoming marriage. See I was engaged to be married to a fine man. I couldn't wait to start a family of my own. All of a sudden, Gabriel appeared beside me. It seems funny now, but my first thought was that I was causing a scandal by being alone with a man, or at least someone who looked like a man. Little did I know that scandal would be mild compared to the one that was about to happen.

So in a most calming voice, Gabriel said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Now, I don't care how calming his voice was, I was terrified that an angel would just appear and start talking to me. You will be terrified if it ever happens to you. I promise. Then, he said the craziest thing. Gabriel told me not to be afraid. Is that an inside angel joke since they often say it while looking at terrified people? Gabriel told me that I was to have a son who will reign on the throne of David. I got terribly excited thinking that I will get pregnant and have a son and I was going to be so faithful to God. Then, I realized he wasn't talking about a future time when I will be married to Joseph, he was talking about now! So, I had to politely let him know that he had made a small miscalculation. But from Zechariah's experience, I knew not to argue with Gabriel.

In my most respectful voice, I asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" I was pretty sure that announcement might be a deal breaker. But he didn't bat one of his huge eyelashes. He said something so crazy that I, I still can't believe it is true. He told me that the Holy Spirit would come on me and the power of the Most High would overshadow me, and so my son would be called the Son of God. Again, I knew from the examples of Sarah and Zechariah not to laugh, so

¹ Genesis 18:12-15

I just bowed and said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” And when I looked up, he was gone.

Now, you may think that I was completely caught by surprise by the whole Gabriel incident, but you would be wrong. I was of the house of David, and knew that I qualified to be the mother of the Messiah. Like all young women of the house of David, I knew the prophecy of Isaiah that said a virgin would have a child.² So I knew that I possessed at least two of the characteristics of the mother of the Messiah.

Some weeks after Gabriel came to me, I hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth in her seclusion. As soon as Elizabeth heard my greeting, her baby jumped in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. For the next three months, Elizabeth and I blessed each other and the Lord. Then, I returned home and Elizabeth soon had her baby.

Upon my arrival in Nazareth, it was apparent I was pregnant. That is when the scandal broke in a fury. My family and friends accused me of fornication while I was away with Elizabeth, and begged Joseph to break our engagement. There was even some talk of stoning me. In order to calm everybody, Joseph sought to find a way to quietly end the engagement. He loved me enough to give up his marriage to me if the people would not stone me. However, he was also too honorable to lie and say the baby was his. Then my beloved Joseph got a big surprise.

Joseph went to sleep and had a very powerful dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him. He was told to take me as his wife because the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not from a man. He was told to name the baby “Jesus.” Then, Joseph did what he would always do. He obeyed the Lord completely and without hesitation.

I was looking forward to a long period of quiet, comfortable seclusion like the one Elizabeth had. That illusion was soon shattered. Caesar Augustus declared that a census was to be taken of the entire Empire, and that meant Joseph and I had to go to Bethlehem to register, since we were pledged to be married³, and because Bethlehem was the town of his ancestor, David. It took many weeks of preparation because we had to travel almost 100 miles. Now I don’t suspect you’ve ever walked or ridden a donkey while you are eight months pregnant, but it was neither a comfortable nor quick way to travel. It took us more than two weeks, and most nights we slept on the ground near the road.

I was thrilled as we bypassed Jerusalem and went straight to Bethlehem because I knew my baby was ready. I was imagining a nice, comfortable bed... only to find that there were not any available rooms in the town. One person was kind enough to let us sleep in his stable, which was really just a shallow cave. However, the soft straw was as pleasant to me as any feather mattress could be. It was a good thing we hadn’t dawdled because...it was time.

² Isaiah 7:14

³ Luke 2:5

Jesus was born in the middle of the night soon after we arrived. We wrapped him in the few clothes we had for him and laid him in a feeding trough. And then, his true father provided us an unbelievable sight. Joseph and I looked out of the cave entrance and saw millions of angels in the sky rejoicing at the birth of Jesus. When Joseph looked at them, he knew that Jesus was the son of God...any of his lingering doubts vanished. He gave me a look of love that any wife would die to have.

We laughed together because besides us, only a few shepherds would have seen the angels since it was the middle of the night. We laughed even harder a few hours later when the shepherds arrived at our door to worship our son. We all praised and worshiped God until they had to return to their flocks. They kept calling my son the "little lamb of God" without understanding what they were saying.

Eight days later the local priest circumcised our son, as required by the laws of Moses. Then sometime after that, we took Jesus to Jerusalem to go through the purification rites. Since we were poor people, we were only required to sacrifice a pair of doves or pigeons. Even so, the moneychangers and bird sellers took advantage of us since we had no choice but to use them. I don't think Jesus ever forgot them when we later told him the story.

As we entered the Temple, an old man came straight to us. Simeon was his name. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that our son was to be the salvation of all nations. After he finished talking to us, an old prophetess came up and gave thanks to God for our son and talked about how he would be the redemption of Jerusalem. Oh, Anna. We marveled at the unexpected reception, but did not tell anybody about it.

I hope you will take the time to read about the entire birth narrative as told by Luke. One of the things you should notice is the stress he puts on God being glorified throughout the process. Luke understood that the entire life of Jesus was centered on glorifying God, and it started even before his birth.

However, as much as I adore Dr. Luke and appreciate his writing, he was not able to capture as many details as I would have liked. So, I hope you will also take time to read the birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, where you will learn about such things as the wise men coming to visit us, and the two years we lived in Egypt to avoid the evil King Herod's wrath.

I don't want to bore you with a long rendition of his childhood, but I will share one last story.

When Jesus was twelve, we took him to the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Many of your modern scholars believe this was the age when our children became adults. We were traveling with a large group of family and friends, and the children played with their friends and moved around in the group as they wished. When we got to Jerusalem, all went well even though there were tens of thousands of visitors in the town. After a few days, our group left to return to Nazareth. I wasn't too concerned about Jesus since I thought he was with the men. But it was

dinner time after we had been gone a full day, and Jesus did not show up for his meal. When we didn't find him anywhere in the group, Joseph and I were frantic. We rushed back to Jerusalem.

For three days, we searched the entire city. The chaos in the crowded city, and all of the possible places where he could have been. Overwhelming. On the third day, we went back up to the gigantic Temple grounds to ask Simeon and Anna if they had seen him. They just pointed to one of the courts. We found Jesus sitting with the teachers, trading questions and answers with them. Everyone was astonished at his understanding and his answers. I chided him for making us so anxious, but he just gave me a little sad smile and asked, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

Jesus' question may seem mysterious to you, but it thrilled Joseph and me. Like all parents whose heritage was from the house of David, we had drilled our firstborn about his ancestors since he was tiny. He could recite their names on both my side and Joseph's side, just as I recited them to both Dr. Luke and Matthew when they wrote their books. He knew exactly whose son he was. He was the son of God, and we had taught him so.⁴

Many people don't believe some parts of my story, and many others don't believe any of it. But, through the ages there have been countless millions who have believed my entire story and used it to bolster their faith. So that's my story... and I'm sticking to it. I hope and pray you will too.

⁴ Luke 3:38