

Isaiah 40:1-5 (Opening)

¹ *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

² *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

*that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

³ *A voice cries:*

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

⁵ *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

I've started re-reading a book by Philip Yancey, called "The Jesus I Never Knew". In the book, he starts by encouraging his readers to understand the preconceived ideas they have about who Jesus was and is.

Each of us has a picture in our head of what Jesus looked like, how He acted, and what He did. Close your eyes for a minute and think. What does Jesus look like? Does He have long hair or short? Curley, wavy, or straight? What color is His hair? Was He tall or short? Skinny, medium, or heavy build?

Over the centuries we've looked at Jesus and how He lived, and studied it like we were looking at light coming through a prism; we see all the parts of the picture, but we don't see it as a single thing. We don't see the white light of the entirety of Jesus, because we're too busy focusing on the red, yellow, blue, or violet parts of the light once we've taken it apart with the prism of our personal experiences and background.

What Philip Yancey tries to do in his book, and what I want to look at for the month of December, is to strip off the preconceived ideas we have about Jesus, and look at Him the way the people of the first century would have looked at Him.

To be able to do that, we need to start at the beginning; well not the real beginning in Genesis, but His earthly beginning. It's amazing to me the difference between the situation surrounding the birth of John and the birth of Jesus. They were only six months apart, but their situations were diametrically opposed to each other; exactly opposite.

Babies are an important part of life. Without babies, well, we wouldn't be here, would we? And without babies, parents, well, parents would get a lot more sleep. But life would be empty.

Having children has always been an important part of life. Farmers always had big families so they'd have lots of free labor around the

farm to get things done. At least that's the story that's always told. I've never been a farmer, so I don't know the real reason.

As a Jew, and especially a married female Jew, it was important to have babies. In Genesis 9:1 it says this:

Genesis 9:1

¹ And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."

The Jews took this very seriously. This was a command from God, not just a blessing; it was a responsibility to have children and fill the earth. So, if a woman couldn't have children, it was a bad thing. Barren women were thought of as cursed by God for some reason. The shame of being barren was sometimes enough to cause a woman to want to die, or even to use a surrogate for her husband to be able to have children. Of course, it never seemed to come into anyone's mind that the problem could be the husband; the weight of the problem was on the woman.

There are many women in the Bible who couldn't have children. The first that comes to mind is Sarah, Abraham's wife. God told Abraham he would have more descendants than sand on the seashore, and I guess that put a lot of pressure on Sarah. She was barren, so she gave her slave to Abraham so "they" could have a son (because God couldn't do it for them, of course). Eventually, Sarah did have a son, though. Her curse was lifted in order to bless the world with Abraham's children.

Another barren woman in the Bible, this one in the New Testament, was Elizabeth, the mother of John. Like Sarah, she and her husband were both old when she became pregnant. Let's look at Luke 1:5-25, and read about how God told Zachariah they would be blessed.

Luke 1:5-25

⁵ *In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.*

⁸ *Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*

¹⁸ *And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a*

vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.²³ And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying,²⁵ “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”

That last verse describes the situation of every woman who was barren and was blessed by God with a child. “He has looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” Just by being born, John was a blessing to his parents because they hadn’t been able to have a child.

Now, let’s skip ahead to John’s actual birth and what happened. Remember, his father, Zachariah, hasn’t been able to talk the entire pregnancy because of his disbelief.

Luke 1:57-66

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father,⁶⁰ but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.”⁶¹ And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.”⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered.⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea,⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

So, once the blessing was given to Elizabeth and Zachariah and he had done what was told him, he could talk again. Also, there were people

around during the delivery; Elizabeth's relatives were there, and they celebrated with her that God had blessed her with a child.

It doesn't say in Luke, but it's possible that Mary was there for John's birth. Elizabeth was her relative, and she did go and visit her. But Mary's situation was completely different than Elizabeth's. Where Elizabeth was old(er) and married, Mary was a young girl, probably in her teens. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but not yet married.

What does that mean, betrothed? I've heard it lots of times, but I don't get it. Well, the way marriages worked back then was like this. The man would come to the father's house and ask to marry his daughter. If the father agreed to it (and sometimes the daughter was consulted), the future husband would sign a contract with the father, and the two were then betrothed, but not married. For all intents and purposes they were married, except they couldn't live together until the future husband could pay the bride price.

Typically, in the last century BC and the first century AD, the bride price was about 200 Denarii. A denarii was a day's pay for the average laborer, so, that's almost a year's salary that the groom would have to get together to pay the bride price. This is on top of his normal daily expenses, whatever they were, so if someone wasn't well established or from a well-to-do family, it could take a while to get the bride-price together.

Also, it was typical for the man to be older than the woman he was marrying. The man was typically between 18 and 30, and the woman was typically between 13 and 24.

So, we have Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph (married but not living together, basically). Let's take a look at their situation in Luke 1.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.*

²⁸ *And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

³⁴ *And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"*

³⁵ *And the angel answered her, "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. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

Here's where things get a little difficult for Mary and Joseph. Joseph was getting the bride-price together. He was working to be able to marry her. And now she turns up pregnant.

This is not a good thing, in the eyes of everyone who's going to see that baby-bump while Mary is still living at home in her father's house. What would the neighbors think?

Well, there's a few options that I'm sure went through everyone's minds. First, she slept with Joseph already. Second, she slept with someone else by choice. Or third, she slept with someone else by force.

Joseph knew it wasn't the first one. If it were the second, that was a stoning offense. If it was the third, and no one heard her cry out, well, that's a stoning offense too. It didn't look good to Joseph, I'm sure. Let's look in Matthew 1:18-25 and see what he went through.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Joseph was a just man and didn't want to shame Mary, so he was going to risk losing the entire bride-price, paying Mary's father the money, and just walk away from the marriage.

I don't know if it's accurate or not, but I imagine Joseph was heart-broken at this point. She wanted someone else, even though they had agreed to be married. He decided to let her go.

But that dream. Maybe it was just that Mary kept saying that she was pregnant because of the Holy Spirit that he had that dream. But he just

couldn't shake it. It seemed so real; like it really happened. So he went through with it. He would marry her.

So, we have Mary and Joseph, probably not "officially" married yet, but Mary is pregnant, and having to travel all the way to Bethlehem for a census. It's probably in the late fall or winter, after the festival of booths, so the harvest is over and in, so the census doesn't conflict with daily life too much.

Let's look at more humbling things that happened when Jesus was born, if this wasn't humbling enough.

Luke 2:1-7

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

There was no fanfare, no family around for the delivery. No excitement for the first-born boy for this new family, because they couldn't be sure of his lineage. His parents kept saying something about an angel talking to them, and that she was still a virgin, even though she was having a baby, so that was obviously a lie. And on top of that, they had to lay him in a feeding trough for the animals because there was no place else for them to stay. The town was so full of people registering for the census that they had to sleep with the animals.

Quite a contrast. Elizabeth the older, barren woman blessed with a child in her old age, giving birth at home surrounded by family. The fact

that she was allowed to have a child showed that she was not cursed by God, but was loved and “her reproach was taken away”.

And then there’s Mary, the young girl, recently betrothed but not married, having a child too early to be conveniently explained away, in a town far from home with none of her close family around for her in this difficult time. And that’s not to mention the fact that not long after He was born, they had to run off to Egypt to avoid Herod’s killing all the young boys in the area because he was so paranoid of someone taking away his throne.

Both of these babies were a blessing to the entire world, but they both grew up in different circumstances, even though they were related. One was the son of a priest (not a typical preacher’s kid), and one the son of a carpenter. And yet the one who the world would assume would be the greater of the two later says that he is not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who was born into the lower situation.

This is the time of year when we’re surrounded with reminders of Jesus’ birth. What better time could there be to talk to people about who Jesus really was and **is** and will be? Yes, He was a baby, just like we were. He was fully human, and lived like other people did, but didn’t sin. He was fully human, and fully God at the same time. He couldn’t have chosen a more humble way to come to this world than He did. He wasn’t anything special to look at, He didn’t command attention because of his family background. People didn’t even think anything good could come from Nazareth, where he lived. But this poor, working-class nobody from a one-horse back-woods town was the son of God, and the Savior of the world.

Philippians 2:4-11 (Closing)

⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.