

Not the Best Start

Baby Jesus didn't have the best start. There was no hospital, or NICU. There were no incubators or birthing pools. His mother didn't have a doula or birthing coach, only a terrified fiancé. Even in Jesus' day, there would traditionally have been a midwife or even a group of women who would have taken Mary into their care until the safe delivery happened and the baby was ready to be named – a tradition reserved for the father.

The account in Luke's gospel does not tell us what happened. It is shockingly short on details. In the "ideal" situation, a midwife would have been summoned, and a city as large as Bethlehem would have had several midwives. Had the midwife arrived, Joseph would have been summarily dismissed until the birth had taken place, which would have been much to his liking. A birthing room was no place for a man, especially an observant Jew such as Joseph.

With the midwife's supervision, Mary would have been placed in a birthing chair or on a hard surface to brace her as she pushed through delivery. Once born, the baby would then be taken and cleaned with salt water or wine because of its antiseptic properties. He then would have been rubbed down with olive oil to soothe his delicate newborn skin. The midwife would stay with Mary until she delivered the placenta, then she would be moved to a softer surface, ideally a bed, to rest.

The baby would be wrapped in bands of cloth, to keep his legs and arms straight and strong. He would be swaddled, but not tightly. Interestingly, in Luke's gospel we read that Mary did wrap her baby in bands of cloth.

Now, given the misadventures that led to Mary going into labour, i.e. no proper room, rather a stable. No hard surface, just straw. No soft bed in which to recover. If Joseph had been with Mary when she gave birth I'm sure that both of them would have been frightened. Mary had likely not attended births before, Joseph certainly had not.

Keep in mind that blood and other bodily fluids have always been associated with uncleanness. This is why men were kept well away from birthing women. Joseph would have to have been in contact with amniotic fluid and other such fluids, likely even blood, which would have rendered him unclean. Although we aren't told specifically, I like to imagine that Joseph did the best he could, and Mary kept her wits about her to tell Joseph what she needed, i.e. salt water, olive oil, damp cloth, etc.

Regardless, it's easy to say that Jesus did not have the best start in life. He was, literally, born in a barn. As a bit of an aside, were any of you told to "shut the door...what, were you born in a barn?" Jesus is one of the only ones to smile and reply "Well, actually..."

Anyway, the nativity scene, or birth of Jesus gets seven verses in Luke's gospel. Seven verses for one of the most profound moments in Christian history. The visit of Gabriel to the shepherds gets more coverage. They get a whopping nine verses, which contains one of the most common themes in the form of a greeting or warning from the angel, when he suddenly appeared to the shepherds. "BE NOT AFRAID".

I often wonder why the angels announce themselves this way. I mean, if you consider it, it's important to understand why angels have to warn folks. We, in the twenty-first century, often think of angels as these adorable cherubic babies who are cute and sweet and brought to you by Disney or Hallmark.

These are not those kinds of angels. Biblical angels would resemble a fully grown man with a huge wingspan. Fingertip to fingertip is our height. The wings extended further than that. They would have to in order to support the weight of a fully grown man. Now just imagine these shepherds. They're in the fields, doing shepherd-y things. Minding their own business, maybe enjoying the stars, on just another ordinary night.

All of a sudden, no theme song, no announcement "Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for...GABRIEL!". No, nothing as auspicious as that. The air above the shepherds is just as it always has been one moment and the next, heeeere's Gabriel!

In all seriousness, Gabriel would have appeared, larger than life, suspended in air, surrounded by God's glory. I'm not sure what that would look like, but I imagine it would be something so beautiful, something so powerful, something so spectacular, that it would defy description yet at the same time be stunningly unforgettable.

Gabriel shows up, terrifies the shepherds, then says "BE NOT AFRAID"...um, too late Gabe. I suppose the greeting is to signal that he's not there to harm the shepherds, rather, he's there to give them some very exciting and absolutely exclusive news. They, out of everyone on earth, receive this good news first!

He tells them they are receiving the most excellent news that they are to share with everyone! "Good news of great joy for all the people". These shepherds are going to become messengers, which is exactly what angels are. They are messengers of God.

And so the shepherds, once they recover from their terrifying ordeal, realise what they have been told and, as fast as they can, they follow Gabriel's instruction on where to find the child, the Messiah. They are, needless to say, in awe of what they see. The juxtaposition would be astounding. They are there to see the Messiah, the one who was promised to release the Jewish people from the Roman captivity they had endured for over six decades.

This incredibly powerful being, is a helpless infant, born in abject physical poverty. His parents are not powerful people. They are not people of wealth, status or privilege. And yet, Mary has given birth to the one who will set the world on it's edge. One who will deliver the promises of God.

We have all heard the Christmas carols that promise "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes". Um really? Have you ever heard of a newborn baby that did not cry? How about "the cattle are lowing"...do you know what that sound is? It can be a sound of distress, and if there was a crying baby in the stable with the cattle, they likely would be distressed.

PLUS, where there had been straw for them to eat, now there is a bundle of – something in their food trough, which does not look, or smell like hay. For all we know, they may be thinking that Baby Jesus is, in fact, their lunch?

Regardless, the juxtaposition of what the shepherds would have been expecting in greeting the Messiah, and what they actually saw would be staggering. They remember what the angels told them...and as they share this information with Mary and Joseph something miraculous happens.

Mary, exhausted from giving birth, and yet elated at bringing an extraordinary life into the world, listens intently to what the shepherds are saying. Neither she nor Joseph are expecting visitors, especially to a stable. And yet, here are these very excited shepherds sharing all they have seen and heard.

Mary "treasured their words, and pondered them in her heart". She's contemplating all she has heard. First the angel Gabriel tells her an extraordinary tale. She's about to give birth to the Messiah. She sings a rallying cry for all that is going to change in the broken world in which she has lived all her life.

She walks for days to be with her fiancé Joseph, so they can register in Joseph's home town of Bethlehem. And as there is nowhere else for them to go, she gives birth in a stable. She wraps up her infant as she would in a city, in a safe, clean room. She does the best she can with what she has.

All of this must have been overwhelming to her. Mary hears the story of the angel, the same one that visited both her and Joseph, has visited these shepherds who are strangers to her. The shepherds tell her the miraculous news that they have heard and that they will share with the world. Their time of captivity is coming to an end.

The one they have been waiting for all their lives is now here. And Mary is the one who has brought the Messiah into the world. As she promised in her song, the world is about to change. This child, whom she will protect with her life, will change the face of the known world with his life.

And so, in a moment of elated bliss, she gathers all she has heard over the past while, all she has endured, and the realisation of all that is yet before her. She is thinking carefully about all of what this means. Mary will need to make a decision, a difficult decision, at some point in her life.

Yet for now, she treasures these beautiful words spoken from the angels, delivered through the shepherds.

The night that love came down to earth and the Messiah was born. The message was delivered with great joy, in humble and austere conditions.

Jesus may not have had the best start in life, nor did he have the best end to his physical life, yet this one moment, captured for all time, was kept safe as treasure as his mother pondered all she had been told. And Mary kept these things close to her heart.

For her gift as both vessel and keeper of the Messiah;
for the shepherd's realisation and message to the world;
and for the angel's conveyance of God's love,
Let us all give thanks. Alleluia! Christ is born.
Amen.

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Luke 2.1-10
Sermon for Christmas Eve
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