

MARY CHRISTMAS

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CHRISTMAS CARDS SERIES

Luke 1:26-38: (NRSV): *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with*

me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

I spent Thanksgiving chatting with a pregnant acquaintance. She's just starting to show. I asked her how she was feeling, and she said, "I feel really good." But she didn't really look like she felt really good. She looked tired. I paused a moment and asked her if her baby has started kicking her yet. That's when the real conversation started about how weird it feels to be pregnant. If you've never been pregnant before — we all say it's nice and we feel good and really it feels like we're stuck in an alien movie where the aliens are inside and trying to get out. It's a strange feeling. There's beauty in it, and there's fear there too. As soon as that baby kicks you, you realize you are not in control anymore.

When we think of Mary having baby Jesus, we have a kind of detachment from it. We don't see it, except in hindsight, and we know, from here, that it ended up fine. And when I've thought of the hardships she faced by being chosen to carry the Son of God as an engaged teenager, I've always thought about the social pressures.

I thought of the external stuff, what the neighbors said, what her family thought, what people whispered as she waddled through the marketplace. But the internal stuff really caught me as I sat down to eat with this pregnant friend. It brought back to me what it was like to carry a child.

It's 24 hours of day of responsibility for someone you haven't met yet. Everything you do, from how often you go to the bathroom to what you eat and how many steps you take is under discussion, because it might effect the baby. The baby controls so much, like when you sleep and what you eat and how comfortably you can move and how well you can concentrate at any given moment. You're in love with this fragile life inside you and the only one who can take care of it, and if anything goes wrong, and a bunch of things can go wrong, it's going to feel like your fault or you fear someone will say it is your fault. So you feel super responsible but everything feels out of your control. And when you say "I'm scared," people say, "Oh, come on. Women have been doing this forever," and they're right. But they've all been afraid, afraid because of what was going on outside them and what was going on inside of them.

An angel came to a teenage girl and said, "Hey, God thinks you're the best and is with you." And Mary is afraid. The angel tells her not to be afraid, and then the angel gives her the news. Good news, right? "Good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (Luke 2:10). The angel tells her what God needs her to give birth to for the benefit of the whole world. Pastor Jon Pavlovitz put it in these beautiful words, "She willingly accepted the collateral damage of bearing goodness in a time and place in which doing so would prove difficult." The world needed Jesus. Times were hard. The country in which these people lived was occupied by a foreign empire. The land was difficult. The taxes were unfair. When people turned to religion for the answers to their questions about life, they didn't find hope. They didn't find love. They found moral policing. On top of Roman policing. It was a lot of policing. There were a lot of rules and a lot of

judgment and a lot of resentment and a lot of not having what was needed.

The world needed God. Desperately. In a form they could recognize and understand and love. With a voice that would break through religious practice and touch people's hearts. The world needed Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

So God needed Mary. Or someone like her. A woman. A woman whose child no one else could claim as their own. I've always thought of the virgin birth as a purity issue, but I think it's a paternity issue. No one else could say this child was theirs. He would be God's child, carried and delivered by Mary.

And Mary said "Yes." Actually, Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." In other words, Mary said, "I'm showing up to serve in the way you just said."

She was going to be the subject of gossip. She was going to be ridiculed. She was going to get kicked. Nothing was going to be under her control, inside or outside her. But the world needed Jesus. So God needed Mary. So Mary carried and delivered — facing internal pressures and external pressures, Mary willingly accepted the collateral damage of bearing goodness in a time and place in which doing so would prove difficult.

We live in such a time and place, in which bearing goodness gets you the side eye, rolled eyes, a horn honk, or an unfollow. We live in a time in which people deal with a lot of rules and a lot of judgment and a lot of resentment and a lot of not having what is needed. And when they turn to religion for their answers to their questions about life, so often they don't find hope or love. They find moral policing.

Advent is a time of preparation for the arrival of Jesus into the world. For the bearing of goodness into a world that doesn't feel like it has much anymore. Think about what Jesus brought to the

world — compassion, hope, love, mercy, grace, honesty, truth-telling, peace. Which of those things are lacking in the world today? What goodness could we be called to bear?

What does God need us to be pregnant with for the benefit of the world? The world still needs Jesus. So God needs us, people who can bear the things God needs the world to have in abundance, people who will give birth to things that are unmistakably of God and not man, people like Mary, who will carry and deliver God's son to the world who needs Him.

There will be collateral damage to bearing goodness here and now. It will mean we're not always in control of everything that's happening inside or outside of us. But the world needs Jesus, so God needs us. In the still moments of Advent, can we listen for what God might be calling us to carry and deliver into the world? Amen.