

Every family has stories that they tell when they get together, especially at the holidays. This certainly happens in my family. My guess is the same thing happens in yours.

Well, this week I gave my kids a story that I will never live down, one that will be repeated for years. After I took the ashes out of our wood burning stove, I put them in the garage too cool. But this time I set them too close to our lawn tractor, closed the door and went back inside. Some time later Joan opened the door and discovered that the garage was full of smoke and one of the tires on the lawn tractor was on fire. Thank God she opened the door when she did. After I got the fire out, the fun began. Needless to say, I have a new nickname. Just call me “Smokey.”

We’re here tonight to think about the first Christmas family. I’m sure they had their own stories to tell, stories that were repeated when they got together. One of those stories is recorded in Luke 2, the account of Mary and Joseph leaving 12 year old Jesus behind in Jerusalem. I’m sure the rest of the kids in the family had some fun with that. And I sure that it was a story repeated by the family since Luke interviewed people who knew Jesus. So he would have talked with Mary and with James, the brother of Jesus who was closest in age to him.

So who were Mary and Joseph? What was life like that first Christmas? One thing I can tell you, it wasn’t like the images we see in movies. It was a lousy time in Israel. Herod the Great was the cut throat King who ruled over Israel under Roman authority. He pretended to be a Jew by giving up pork, but he wasn’t Jewish. But he was blood thirsty. He place high taxes on the people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. But he also built monuments to Caesar and to the Roman gods. It was a time when the rich and powerful did well at the expense of the poor and the oppressed.

Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth, a small village of about 200 people overlooking the Jezreel Valley, the perfect location for a Roman military base. This was not a good combination. As a result, people from Nazareth did not have a good reputation.

Mary and Joseph not only grew up in Nazareth, they were engaged there. Because marriage in Israel at that time was the joining of two families, teenagers could not be trusted to get it right. So marriages were arranged. Then a legal contract was drawn up and vows were exchanged. This was followed by a betrothal period that could last up to a year. The couple was considered legally married, but lived at home and did not have physical relationships. The time they spent together was carefully supervised. This betrothal period gave the man time to prepare their home and the woman time to complete the require purification rituals. When everything was set, the groom would take his bride home for a celebration that could last up to seven days.

It was during this betrothal period that Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel. Everyone in Israel knew the prophecies and was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah King. At least the

poor and downcast were, because they hoped that the yoke of their oppressors would be broken. The rich and powerful that oppressed the poor may not have been so eager for the Messiah to come. Remember how Herod the Great responded to the news from the Wise Men.

Luke reported the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary this way, “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” (Luke 1:26-28) Then Gabriel told Mary the most remarkable thing. “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.” (Luke 1:30-31) Mary asked a simple question, “How can a virgin conceive a child?” Gabriel told her that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Her response to the angel was amazing. Mary said that she was the servant of the Lord. She voluntarily agreed to be part of God’s plan to rescue the world by sending the Messiah. Mary submitted her will to God’s will. She was the bearer of the most wonderful secret in all of history. But because people would not understand or believe, she would suffer the consequences for a sin she did not commit.

We don’t know exactly when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. It could have been before her trip to visit her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, or after her return. Either way, when Joseph discovered that Mary was expecting, he faced a tough time. I can’t even imagine the pain and confusion he felt. Joseph had three options. He could expose Mary that would have resulted in her being stoned to death and having his name cleared. The Gospel of Matthew tells us Joseph could not and would not do that. So he planned to get a quiet divorce. It seemed like the logical and wise thing to do.

Then God sent an angel to talk with Joseph and presented him with a third option. The angel told Joseph that Mary’s child was indeed conceived by the Holy Spirit, so he was indeed the son of God; that the child was the promised Messiah and that Mary was innocent. The visit of the angel gave Joseph peace of mind. He understood the risks, counted the costs and accepted Mary’s difficulties as his own. Joseph went ahead with their plans and took Mary home as his wife.

Mary and Joseph were part of God’s plan to rescue and restore people. The message of Christmas is that God loves us so much that he entered our world to take our burdens upon Himself and free us from evil and all of its consequences. So tonight, as we remember the first Christmas family, we thank God for Mary and Joseph. We also ask that God would help us to follow their example, that we would believe His promises, listen to His words and obey His commands, put our trust in His help and receive the gift of His Son. Mary and Joseph were the first to receive the gift of Jesus, but not the last. Jesus is God’s gift for all people. He is the gift that lasts forever. Amen.