

Giving Up on Perfect

A number of years ago the sports shoe company, Fila, ran an ad that featured NBA All Star, Grant Hill. It had a photo of him with this copy surrounding him:

This year Grant Hill led his team in scoring, rebounding, assists, and steals; led his team back into the playoffs, led the league in triple doubles, led the league in All-Star balloting... didn't punch an official, didn't demand a contract extension, was never tardy, listened to his mother, remembered the doorman at Christmas, made his bed daily, promised to take shorter showers in an effort to conserve water, fixed the loose brick in the walkway so the mailman wouldn't trip, chose paper over plastic, improved his vocabulary, counted his blessings, fed coins into other people's parking meters, kept his thermostat at 68, practiced what he preached, actually paid attention to the stewardess emergency flight instructions and vowed to do better next year. ⁱ

So, how are your preparations going for Christmas this year? Are you feeling pressured to "outdo" last year's Christmas? You know, bigger and better decorations, bigger and better gifts? Or maybe it's not about bigger and better, but just about it being perfect? You know, perfect food, perfectly behaved children, perfect weather. (Good luck with that!) Or maybe the pressure for you is to make it smaller, less materialistic, a more meaningful Christmas? [Is anybody besides me finding it takes more work to have a simpler Christmas? Simple is hard!!] What would a "perfect Christmas" look like for you?

Was the first Christmas perfect? Or have we over-romanticized it! It gives us a warm, fuzzy feeling, doesn't it, just to think about Mary and Joseph and the Babe, resting quietly, while the shepherds sang Christmas carols to them there in the nice warm, clean barn with the sweet smelling animals in the hay. Have we become completely delusional? What was the first Christmas really like and what are the life principles embedded in that story that we are meant to imitate? That's what we want to examine today. The first principle we need to imitate from the first Christmas is that...

I. We Need to Listen to God More.

You see, we've come to think of Christmas as something that is carefully and thoroughly planned and, if anything happens that isn't planned, our Christmas is ruined. Right? Spontaneity is the enemy of Christmas!!

But think about it: The first Christmas was totally spontaneous – at least from Mary and Joseph's perspective. Mary and Joseph's plans did not include ANY of the events of Christmas. None. Mary was enjoying her engagement to Joe. She was looking forward, as every young bride does, to a wonderful wedding ceremony and then the excitement of moving into a new house (probably one that Joe was custom building for her!). Then kids would come and the joy of family and community life in their little farming town that overlooked the most fertile cropland in Israel, the Jezreel Valley. I'm sure Mary was the envy of all of her young girlfriends.

Likewise, Joseph was excited to be engaged to Mary. She was not only beautiful but so spiritually mature for her young age. Work was abundant for Joseph, and as his reputation increased, it would only get better. And as every builder knows, reputation is everything! Word of mouth advertising is the best.

But then, disaster struck! Luke 1:26-28 did NOT figure into Mary and Joseph's plans. It did NOT fulfill their dreams for the future. It blew up their dreams!

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent 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." Mary was greatly troubled at his words... (Luke 1:26-29)

Why was Mary troubled? Because there go all her plans. Plans for the wedding, plans for any kind of celebration - because who is ever going to believe this story of how she became pregnant? Matt. 1 records Joseph's decision after what I imagine were weeks of sleepless nights, agonizing over what he should do. He could've had Mary arrested and even stoned, if it turned out that she had willingly become pregnant by someone else. But Joseph just could not bring himself to do that, so according to Matt. 1:19:

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Instead of a wedding, Joseph is planning a divorce. He, of course, knew that he wasn't just losing the girl of his dreams, he was also losing his reputation and his vocation. Who would hire him now? He'd have to relocate to another town just to put food on the table! What a mess! What an incredible mess!

Has anyone here silently said those words about Christmas 2014? "It's a mess. It's a real mess." If you've said that, then you need to realize this: you're in the running for a more "authentic Christmas" than most of the rest of us in this room. If your Christmas is looking like it could be messy and smelly with multiple spontaneous interruptions to your "Perfect Christmas" plans, then guess what? It looks like you're also in the running for what Joseph and Mary experienced: a personal encounter with the God of the Universe. So, when God blows up your carefully constructed plans, what should you do? Number one: listen.

Mary was '*greatly troubled*' but she listened to Gabriel who said:

...Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. (Lk. 1:30)

God was not punishing Mary and He's not punishing you. Mary's wedding celebration, as she planned it, was gone. It was never coming back. Her wedding was gone, but not her marriage. Her dream of her future life was forever changed. It would never happen as she had imagined it. But her life as a wife, a mother and a member of her community was now forever fortified, magnified, expanded, improved beyond her wildest dreams. And the same was true for Joseph. Rather than losing the love of his life, they now were more deeply and permanently fused together than he could have possibly imagined. And his reputation? Far from being lost, it would now be eternally etched in the history books of the entire world.

Why were Mary and Joseph's lives blessed in their mess? First, because they listened to God. God spoke to Joseph in a dream and He spoke to Mary through an angel while she was wide awake. God uses different methods to speak to people -

sometimes while they're sleeping, sometimes while they're wide awake. If someone next to you is sleeping right now, don't wake him up! God may have a better shot at him while he's sleeping!! The main thing is this: Are you listening? What looks to you like a mess, may be God preparing to bless - beyond your wildest dreams.

Secondly, if we're going to imitate the first Christmas...

II. We Need to Put God's Word Into Action.

Mary was told that she would become pregnant and that her cousin, Elizabeth, was also pregnant so since Mary was unmarried, it says...

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

(Lk. 1:39, 40)

This was just the normal, socially acceptable thing to do. It was the logical way for Mary to put God's Word into action. Likewise, Joseph woke up from his dream and...

...he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (Matt. 1:24)

We have to understand the time frame here. Mary was probably with Elizabeth for at least three months, until Elizabeth's baby was born. Then she probably went to live with Joseph's family, since it says in [Luke 2:5](#) that, when they first got to Bethlehem, she...

...was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

So, it appears that they were married in Bethlehem, which means it would've been a "Justice of the Peace" style wedding. The point is this: both Mary and Joseph did what God clearly directed them to do and, while the outcome was unusual (they literally were taken on a remarkable multi-country adventure!), it all worked for their good. The mess led to God's blessing! Joseph lived till he died with the woman of his dreams and Mary got everything she dreamed of - children, a loving husband and a vibrant community - everything except her big, memorable wedding ceremony. However, I think Mary will be duly honored at a much bigger wedding ceremony - the biggest in the history of the universe! Mary will be the Mother of the Groom at the wedding supper of her Son, the Lamb of God, as described in [Rev. 19!](#)

Do you see the application? In the messiness of your Christmas, don't lose hope, don't despair. First, listen carefully for the voice of God. He may not speak to you in a dream but He IS speaking to you in this book! Listen to what He has to say about your particular situation, whether it's a family issue or a friendship or your work situation. Look and listen to what God says about it and then do what He says to do. Yes, it may blow up part of your dream. It may launch you on an international adventure! But if you will listen and obey, your godly dreams will one day come true. Listen and then do what He says. Lastly...

III. We Need to Redefine Perfect.

Biblical perfection is different from human perfection. Biblical perfection is not pain-free. Biblical perfection doesn't make you the envy of your neighborhood. To put it bluntly, the first Christmas for Mary and Joseph was exhausting, annoying, smelly, messy and required quite a bit of on-the-spot problem solving. Think about it: There's no room in the inn, so are you going to take the shed or keep looking? Quick, Joseph! You've gotta decide on the spot!

The night the baby is born, shepherds show up saying “angels” sent them to visit the baby. Shepherds in Joseph’s day did not have the highest moral reputation. Quick, Joseph! Decide! Are these guys safe? Do you let them into the shed? They probably smelled worse than the animals!

We tend to think about the shepherds and the Wise Men being at the manger together. But that didn’t happen. It says in Matt. 2 that the Magi visited Mary in a “house,” not a stable. So, Joseph obviously had moved from the stable to a house. And they might have lived there for a year or more because King Herod knew from the Magi “the exact time” the star had appeared, presumably indicating when Jesus was born. So, when Herod gave the order to kill all the boys two years old and younger, it was obviously to cover that date.

The Magi show up in the house with gifts worth a lot of money! Quick, Joseph, you’ve gotta decide! Are these guys a blessing or a threat?

After they leave, Joseph is visited again by an angel and told to move his family to Egypt, because King Herod wants the baby dead. Notice that the angel doesn’t tell Joseph how long they’ll be in Egypt. Quick, Joseph! The government wants your baby! You gotta decide – trust the angel or trust the government?

Twice more, an angel directs Joseph – first to leave Egypt and then to settle back in Nazareth. So, five times in all, Joseph is instructed what to do by an angel. Each time, he follows the instructions precisely. Remember, there are no planes, trains or automobiles. Going to Egypt and back means walking... with a toddler!!

So, when they finally got back to Nazareth, it’s probably 5 or 6 years after they first left. How do you suppose Mary and Joseph described their adventure? If it were you, would the word “PERFECT” appear in your description?

First of all, it was probably Mary who did the talking because, throughout the whole New Testament, we don’t hear Joseph say one word! We hear what he was thinking in Matthew 1 and we know what was in his dreams, so he must have told somebody the story, but we never hear him speak. Anybody here married to a Joseph? It can be a bit frustrating, can’t it? It’s a challenge being a “mind reader.” But don’t go negative on your Joseph because we must notice this about “silent-as-a-rock Joseph”: he’s a great listener! He listened carefully to God and He did exactly what God told Him to do. He didn’t define the situations of his life based on HIS understanding of them. He defined them based on God’s definition of them.

It seemed right to Joseph to break off his engagement to Mary, but God said, “No, Joseph. Marry her. She has not been unfaithful to you. What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” It was unusual, it was illogical, but since God said it, Joseph believed it. And Joseph acted on God’s definition of reality, not his own.

Mary did the same thing. Mary was more verbal, she spoke her feelings. She said to the angel, “*How will this be since I am a virgin?*” But when Gabriel told her too, that it was of the Holy Spirit, she said:

I am the Lord’s servant... May it be to me as you have said. (Lk. 1:38)

Is that how you react to the Word of God? You read something there that doesn’t seem to fit with your view of reality. Do you ignore it and say, “That can’t be right! None of my friends believe that!” Or, like Mary, do you ask your questions but in the end say, “I am the Lord’s servant, so even if I don’t understand it, I hear it. So, I’m going to do it.” How do you respond to the “whole counsel of God”?

If Mary and Joseph had seen the plan for the next five years of their life before it all happened, I doubt that they would've called it perfect. But if you asked them today, or if you asked the Magi or the shepherds or the inn keeper or whomever they got to know in Egypt, or if you asked anyone who had anything to do with this story (with the possible exception of King Herod) you know what I think they'd all say today? I think they'd say...

- It was perfect timing for Caesar Augustus to call for a census so pregnant Mary could get to Bethlehem where the Messiah had to be born.
- It was perfect planning for all the inns to be full, so Jesus the King could be born in a manger, identifying with even the poorest person on earth.
- It was perfect protection for the Magi to be sent, following a star, to give Joseph the gold to pay for his trip to and from Egypt.
- It was perfect organization to have the prophet Simeon and the prophetess Anna in the Temple, exactly eight days after Jesus was born, to speak words of encouragement and confirmation to Mary and Joseph.

So, I truly believe that if you asked Mary and Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, the inn keeper about that first messy, frantic, exhausting, smelly Christmas. I think everyone of them would say, "You know, seriously; it was just perfect!"

This year, let's not just talk about Mary and Joseph and the others. Let's not just put out our manger scenes and sing our songs; let's go one step further. Let's join them. Let's take on their mindset. Let's decide now – I'm NOT going to judge whether this Christmas is perfect or not by my own standards. No, no; this year, I'm going to listen carefully for God's voice. I'm going to pray, "Lord, what's YOUR plan this year? Whom do you want around my table? What surprise visitor do you want me to invite? What spontaneous action do you want me to take?"

And when He speaks, when you see Him opening a door (even if it's a barn door!), if you're trusting Him, just say what Mary said, "I'm the Lord's servant!" Just do what Joseph did – say nothing! Instead...

- Just go sleep in the barn!
- Just invite the shepherd with a questionable background into your shed!
- Just accept the treasures from the guys from the east!
- Just leave your country!
- Just move back to your hometown!
- Just marry the girl of your dreams!
- Just wake up and do whatever the angel of the Lord has commanded you.

And one day, perhaps 2,000 years from now, you'll look back on Christmas 2014 and you'll say, "That Christmas was perfect!" Let's pray...

ⁱ Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 152