

# God With Us

By Steven James

(Matthew 1:18-2:23; Luke 1:26-56)

“Wake up!” His mouth is against my ear; his words urgent, rushed. Gently but firmly, he grabs my shoulder and shakes me awake. For a moment the strength in his hands startles me.

“What? What’s wrong?” I open my eyes, but I’m afraid to move. My heart is thumping.

He pulls the warm wool blanket off me. A rush of cold air sends shivers down my spine. The flickering oil lamp in the corner of the room sends wild shadows dancing across the walls.

Joe is already dressed. “C’mon, we need to get outta here. Grab the baby and let’s go.”

“But it’s the middle of the nigh—”

“I know what time it is. The longer we stay, the more danger we’re in.”

Now I’m really scared. The baby! My baby is in danger!

I stand up stiffly and rush toward the child. “How do you know?”

“Um . . . I’ll explain on the way.”

Wrapped up in thick blankets, sleeping in the cradle that Joe made for him, the baby looks so peaceful. So innocent. I pick him up gently. Even though Joe isn’t the father, he has always looked out for him. Protected him.

As I glance around in the faint light, I notice Joe has grabbed only one small

bag.

“Where are we going?”

“Far away. To Egypt,” he says.

Egypt? I clutch the baby to my chest as Joe snatches up a few of his tools and the gifts we’d been given earlier that night and tosses them into the sack. Sure, the presents are valuable, but they’ll hardly cover a trip to Egypt and back.

Or maybe we aren’t coming back.

“We’ll be safe. Hurry!”

*Safe from what?* I think, as he grabs my hand, and we stumble out into the chilly night. All I can think of is how I got into this predicament in the first place.

++++

I never suspected I was pregnant.

The day I got the news I was totally surprised. Shocked. This pregnancy was about as unplanned as they come.

Not only was I surprised, but I was also scared. I had so many questions.

*What do I do now? Who could I talk to? Who could I trust?*

I kept thinking, *I’m 14 years old, I’ve never even kissed a guy, and I’m gonna have a baby!*

I could just hear people talking. “Another pregnant teen. Another unwed mother. Just what we need. What is this country coming to?”

But I *am* married! Well, sorta. Joe and I had been engaged for a couple of years, since I was about 12. Yeah, I’ll admit it’s a little young, but he was a good guy with a steady construction job. And he loved me.

But I knew how my friends would react to the news. Whispers. Rumors. Getting all quiet when I walked by. Stepping aside to let me pass. Talking about me when I wasn't around. I knew the names they'd call me, the things they'd say. Who could blame them?

Where could I turn? I'd never felt so alone.

For starters pregnant teens aren't exactly welcome in my town. Usually, they'd do their best to keep it quiet for as long as possible and then, when word leaked out, there'd be trouble. Big trouble.

When I was just a kid, there was this girl who was caught in bed with her boyfriend. Her relatives didn't waste any time with lawyers or lawsuits. They just gathered some neighbors, formed a little mob, dragged her into the street, and killed her. Premarital sex is not taken lightly here.

I wondered how soon it would be until the neighbors found out about me.

No one was gonna believe my story. Everyone would think Joe and I had slept together. And since he's 31, we'd both be in trouble. Everyone would blame him for taking advantage of me, saying he should have known better, that it was his fault. Then the law would get involved—and who knows what would happen.

But the thing is, Joe and I had never had sex. Honest! Our relationship wasn't physical at all. Oh, I know what you're thinking now. "She's engaged to this one guy, and there she is sleeping around!"

But I wasn't! I swear!

It was all so confusing. I wished there was an easy way out—or at least someone to talk to.

I guess I could've told Joe. "Hi, sweetie, how was your day? Things have been a little slow here. By the way, Gabe stopped by. Yeah, the angel who appeared to Daniel about 600 years ago. He told me I'm gonna have God's baby even though I'm still a virgin. My son is gonna be King of the Universe. Other than that it's been a pretty boring afternoon." What would he think? What would you think—that I'd been eating rotten figs again?

All he had to do was say the word, and I'd be killed.

Now don't get me wrong. Joe is a really strong believer. I didn't think he'd turn me in, but honestly, I couldn't expect him to stick with me either. After all, it's not his baby. He'd be ridiculed, mocked. Maybe worse. And the angel hadn't even mentioned him. So I assumed I'd be a single parent, going it alone.

Even if Joe believed me, who else would? Sure we could rush and get married. But it doesn't take that much effort to count the months. Everyone would be thinking we were sleeping together before we got married, or at least there'd always be questions about who the father really was. If our engagement did survive, it would ruin Joe's career. We'd be outcasts forever. Despised. Alone.

So I just stood there pinching myself, thinking, "Okay, Mary, chill out. That was a real angel. You are not imagining things. You are not crazy. *You are not crazy.*"

But who *would* believe me? I just wished there was someone I could talk to. Someone who could understand how a girl feels when—

Liz!

The angel had said something about my cousin Liz being pregnant as well.

She and her husband had been trying for years to have kids. I kept wondering why God hadn't answered their prayers and given them a child. But now! What had the angel said? "Nothing is impossible with God!"

I had to be sure. And I had to talk to someone who would be able to understand. So I grabbed a few things and headed to Liz's place in the country.

The trip took me about a week, which was pretty good time, considering. I mean, a young girl traveling the streets by herself? You know the kind of stuff that can happen. But I guess God was with me—no, I *know* he was. I arrived safe and sound.

And then I knocked on her door.

"Hello? Anyone home?" The door was unlocked, so I walked in. "Liz, you are not gonna believe what happened to me last week!"

"Mary? Is that you?"

You should have seen her face when I walked into the room.

The second she saw me, she started calling me God's mommy and stuff like that, really honoring me. She even said that the baby she was carrying jumped for joy when I walked in the door. It blew me away.

That was it. That moment I knew for sure everything was for real. I couldn't keep it in anymore. I just burst out singing!

I stayed to help during her pregnancy. And then after Liz had her baby (it was a boy, by the way), I knew I needed to return to Nazareth. I had to tell Joe. Regardless of how he might respond, he had to know. And I wanted to be the one to tell him.

I mean, think about it. One day I'm there, and the next I'm gone. No word. Nothing. Then three months later I return home—three months pregnant. I wanted to make sure I caught up with him before the rumors did.

I went straight to the construction site. When he saw me, he threw down the saw and came jogging over to me, calling out, "Mary, where have you been? I heard . . ."

He knew.

Maybe it was the look on my face. Or the way I stood. Or the stories he'd heard. But somehow he knew.

"Joe, let me explain."

"Are you . . . ?"

I told him. And as I did, he lowered his eyes. I rambled on about God and angels and miracle babies, kings and thrones and impossible promises.

And then he looked at me. It wasn't sadness in his eyes—or even disappointment, like I'd expected. He didn't seem angry, just sort of confused. I knew he was trying to believe me, to piece it all together. He wanted me to be telling the truth, but a storm of emotions passed over his face.

"It's true, Joe. It's a miracle!"

"Mary, I need to think." Then he turned and walked away.

I couldn't blame him. I'd needed three months to let the news sink in. I couldn't expect him to be jumping off the walls the moment I arrived back home. But watching him walk away that day was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Would he come back? Or would I be facing the future alone? A voice

inside of me was screaming, *No! Come back! I'll do anything you want—just don't walk away from me!*

That night I begged God to show Joe the truth, to make it clear to him.

That's when I started thinking about the name the angel had told me to give my son. You'd spell it "Jesus" or Joshua. But of course we spelled it "Yeshua," like the warrior who replaced Moses as the leader of our people and like the high priest during the time when they rebuilt our temple. The angel said he'd be a king! My son, the Warrior, the Priest, the King!

His name means, "Yahweh saves." Yahweh! God's name, the name he told to Moses. It means, "I AM." Or as my father told me when I was growing up, "The One who is always present." I was carrying Yeshua—"the God who is always present, the God who saves." Hadn't Isaiah the prophet written that when the Messiah came, he would be called "Immanuel" that is—"God with us"? It was true!

God with us . . .

The angel had said I'd be with child. How strange—when it's really the other way around. The child would be with *me*.

++++

*As we grab the donkey to saddle her for the journey, Joe turns to me.*

*"Don't be afraid, Mary. Our God will be with us."*

*Our God will be with us . . . just as he was with Moses and Joshua and Daniel and Isaiah. Our God will be with us—the promise whispered through the centuries ever since the days of the prophets. Most people don't believe in that*

*stuff anymore.*

*But I do. As I look down into little Yeshua's eyes, I realize God is already with us: to go anywhere we go, to face any troubles we face, to calm any fears we have. So we never have to be alone again. Not ever.*

*And as I climb onto the donkey and prepare for the trip, the child reaches out his hand for me. And smiles.*