

Beautiful Chaos
Christmas Gathering
12/21/08

Music Up
Instrumental/Away in a Manger

Reader 1

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem--because he was of the house and lineage of David--to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

Narrator

And so the story begins. It's been called the greatest story ever told, and yet it begins in the unlikeliest of spots--with an infant in the unsure hands of a poor rural couple swept up in the movement of an empire.

It is a story we know very well. We know it so well that all its pieces and parts and characters and settings, seem to be etched in our minds and hearts at birth. It's as if two thousand years of telling and retelling, of writings and reenactments--from the greatest stages and actors of an age to children in bedsheets—have created a collective knowing about this little family, this holy family being moved about by God and Rome...and about this God who chose to live among us, to love among us--as one of us.

And so the story begins. And in it's unfolding we nod and smile at the familiar images, but there is a danger here of missing the point. Because far too often, we can know something so well that we don't know it at all. That we can be so familiar with something that we cease to really consider it anymore, like music on an elevator. That this story that we seem to have known beyond memory, remains just that...a story we've heard somewhere before.

When a story is just a story, it's safe. When a story is just a story, it can be held at arms' length and studied, believed or not believed, treasured, and even loved. But at arm's length, it's still just a story. A beautiful story that stirs us and fills us with breathless intent, but is quickly packed away with nativity scenes and strings of lights. At arm's length, a story can be brought out and displayed once a year and never allowed to touch the places that really matter.

What is it about this story that we are meant to understand so deeply that our lives actually change? That the lives of our families begin to mirror the life of this holy family? Why has this story been carefully passed on to us from generation to generation, through billions of minds and hearts, from antiquity to postmodernity, from East to West, from Hebrew to Greek to Roman to European to the New World. It must be much more than merely a story that is being transmitted here.

The story itself is so short. The precious few lines in Matthew and Luke that tell us all we know of Jesus' birth, infancy, and childhood give only the broadest details, the barest outline. So much more is *not* said than said and remains hidden between the lines. And in that vacuum--all those missing human details--we sometimes imagine that Miryam and Yosef—Aramaic for Mary and Joseph--were somehow different than us. That perhaps they were so infused with God's spirit that life was lived differently at *their* altitude—that they always spoke in proper King James Aramaic and never fought or were irritated or afraid...never felt guilt or regret...

We can imagine all sorts of ways that Yeshua's—Jesus'—family was different than our own, but as soon as we see them as other than us, we remove *ourselves* from this greatest story ever told, and that was never Yeshua's intent. He meant for us not to merely read his story, but to enter into it, participate in every detail, and experience what his family and friends experienced of his life and love. If, in a very real way, we can't *become* Miryam and Yosef, see God with us in the faces of our own children as they did in the face of theirs, then we've missed the point.

This morning, as we celebrate the birth of Yeshua into our lives, we want to share with you little slices of life—verbal snapshots taken by mothers and fathers across the country of their experiences, their feelings, and their awareness of God in the presence of their own children. As you listen to these stories and poems, I can't imagine you won't find yourself in many of them. They are beautifully written and paint unforgettable images of moments we can all recognize. Let yourself enter into these experiences, let them trigger memories of your own, and imagine Miryam and Yosef sitting with us here nodding their heads in unison with ours as if to say, "Yes, I know, I remember..."

Listen to this moment Cari Melby had with her son:

Reader 2

I hold Nathan by bent elbows as he burrows into my lap like a rabbit into his den. I feel the roundness of his bottom shifting and shimmying into the space I've created for him with my crossed legs. Nathan leans his back into my waiting torso and melts into me. His head fits just under my chin.

I move my chin back and forth over his hair and am caressed by its downy softness.

Nathan inserts his thumb into his mouth and his hand runs over my pant leg like an ant in search of food. He finds his morsel, a wrinkle in my pants. He rubs the wrinkle through his fingertips over and over again. His motion creates a rhythmic sensation on my thigh. If he'll let me, I fold my arms around him and press this ball of energy, now still, closer to me.

The smooth skin on his arms rubs against the underside of my arms, where my skin is still soft like his. Snuggled against me so close, I bend my neck and kiss his cheek. My lips touch the plumpness of his toddler face and linger there savoring the pleasures of motherhood.

Narrator

Touch. The simplicity of just holding each other, skin to skin, face to face. There is nothing in human experience that connects us to each other more securely than a simple touch. It's part of the way we know each other and the God who infuses all life.

Long before Matthew wrote it into his Gospel, Yeshua's earliest followers had called him and understood him as Immanuel—a Hebrew word that Isaiah used and which literally means *God with us*. To everyone who really knew him, Yeshua was *God with us*. To Miryam and Yosef, in a way they may never have fully understood, this pregnancy, this birth, this crying infant, this toddler, this youth, this boy they raised to manhood was Immanuel—*God with us*.

But he was still their infant, their little boy that they held and caressed. And he *was* a little boy in every sense of that word. How do you experience *God with us* as you

change whatever passed for diapers in first century Israel? Or when you nurse him or nurse him back to health from a fever or worry over his whereabouts and safety as the sun begins to set?

When we remove human touch from our understanding of Yeshua's birth and life with his family, we remove our own ability to experience Immanuel, God with us, in the eyes, faces, and lives of those closest to us--the ones hanging their toothbrushes next to ours. We miss the main point that God came and dwelt among us, that Yeshua lives and dwells among us still—in every pair of eyes we encounter.

Yeshua began life as all children do. Luke tells us he grew in wisdom and stature, which means he had to learn as we learn. Did he make mistakes too? What must it have been like to parent Yeshua bar Yosef? *Any* baby changes our lives beyond recognition—more than any other single event in life. But *this* child? How did Yeshua change his parents' lives? How has he changed ours?

Janna Logan tries to explain this kind of change in a haiku for her daughter Isley...

Reader3

Beautiful chaos.

An unexpected gift that
I love beyond life.

You've changed my life in such a wild and wonderful way, my little girl.
Thank you.

Love, Mommy

Narrator

Beautiful chaos...unexpected gift...wild and wonderful... These are words and images only intimate experience could express. A child is chaos personified, bringing the unexpected into our lives at every turn, and usually at the worst possible moment.

The trick this mother has learned—at least on a good day—is to hold what we normally see as opposites together in one embrace: beautiful chaos... unexpected gift. To hold beauty and chaos together in a single grasp is to see the beauty in chaos and chaos in the beauty of life. Children are God's *metaphor* for life—they embody and embrace all life's seeming opposites and contradictions—as we do as well, when we embrace *them*. Yeshua brought beautiful chaos to Miryam's life. But even beautiful chaos is still chaotic, disorienting, and frightening. Hebrew girls were traditionally betrothed at 12 and a half, so Miryam was just a child herself, possibly as young as 13 or 14 when suddenly faced with a pregnancy outside of marriage, an offense for which she could have been stoned. Imagine the terror of telling her family and especially her future husband—the agonizing wait for Yosef's decision upon hearing that his fiancé was pregnant—would he break the engagement? Prosecute legally? Send her away secretly? Imagine Yosef's pain and anger. Imagine the financial pressures and uncertainty about the future, about God's will, about the child himself.

But Yosef takes Miryam and her unborn child to himself and covers and protects her with his love. And with that decision made, the whirlwind of their marriage begins. We don't know how many years they had together; Yosef may have been much older than Miryam, and somewhere between the lines of Scripture, Mary's beloved husband and protector, dies. It's impossible to know when, or how old Yeshua was at the time when Miryam suddenly found herself a single mother—we only know that Yosef is gone when Yeshua begins his teaching. And we may never know what strength Miryam drew from her son, from family and friends, from the kindness of strangers God may have put in her difficult path, but we do have clues...

Kate Fallon Hanan writes about her own loss:

Reader4

When I was a on the edge of womanhood, I dreamed of falling in love, of being a writer, of traveling, teaching, and graduate school. Life spilled open before me and opportunities seemed endless; good fortune piled itself like packages on my doorstep. But as I hear my seven-year-old's footsteps padding into my room and the easy creak of the bed as he slides between the cold sheets into the spot his father used to occupy, it seems my luck has run out.

"Lava," he whispers.

Last week it was meteors and the week before that, hurricanes. Since his father died, there is no end to the horrific nightmares he conjures in his sleep.

My son pushes his cold feet against my warm knees, a small consolation for his disrupted rest. Being a single parent of two is as hard as I ever imagined it would be. I think of the list of people I could phone, girlfriends I rely on at moments like this. I know it is too late to call, but I also know that she would answer if I did, and that golden truth reminds me that, after a night of holding back lava or dodging meteors, blessings still exists. How would I ever manage without my friends? How would any of us ever make it out of the rubble?

Alex, Krista, Deb, and I met in the fall of 1997 at a community mom's group. With toddlers on our hips and babies on the way, we bonded over diaper rashes, breast feeding, and stories of our lives before stretch marks. It wasn't long before our husbands met and we were having barbeques, dining out, and vacationing together.

In June of 2005, my husband died suddenly at the age of thirty-five. In the weeks and months that followed, Alex, Deb, and Krista were like scaffolding—layers and layers of support that held me together when surely my life and my heart were broken. When my house was dirty they cleaned. When I was lonely, they stayed up late to send me emails or talked on the phone. When I lost too much weight, they fed me, and when that didn't work, they took me shopping for smaller designer jeans. They babysat, finished

projects, told my kids stories of their father, and like trick mirrors they made it seem as if I was fearlessly doing it all on my own. Only I know better, I know who sent me flowers months after the funeral. I know who cleaned out my refrigerator. I know who cancelled plans in order to spend time with me. I know these things.

When the great love of one's life dies, the pain is excruciating. My heart is shattered, but every day God sends me an angel with a little piece of tape to patch myself up. It has been months now, and the tape is still coming, bits and pieces to glue the raw wounds together. And through this, I am reminded that opportunities are still open before me. The gifts in my life are not wrapped the way I thought they would be, but my friends are the packages scattered on my doorstep; they are God's pure grace with an endless supply of tape to bind me together while I heal.

Narrator

Beautiful chaos. Unexpected gifts. Yeshua thrust Miryam and Yosef on a journey that took them a lifetime away from Nazareth and all they knew and loved. How much did Miryam know of the beautiful chaos that awaited her acceptance of this child? We think that since the angel spoke to her that she must have been fully informed, but when spirit speaks to spirit, sometimes the message isn't as much intellectual as heartfelt. And whatever Miryam may have understood about her role in Immanuel, could it really have prepared her for all the wild and wonderful things that followed? What did Miryam really know?

Music Up

Mary Did You Know?

Narrator

What did Mary know, and when did she know it? Did things turn out as she expected? Did she expect anything specific at all? Is it possible she felt regret? Did she feel anger or resentment? Toward what? Whom? Did she ever feel she was an abject failure? That God certainly could have picked a better person to carry his son, raise him, teach and nurture him... *We often feel that way, is it so hard to believe this young girl may have as well?*

Rebecca Peacock writes of regret--and forgiveness:

Reader2

I couldn't believe it when my alarm went off in the morning. After leaving my job a month ago I had been living the life of a stay-at-home mom with my 8 month old daughter and loving it. She and I had our routine down, and I loved our mornings snuggled up in bed, her soft little hand in mine as she nursed happily. However, like all good things this was destined to come to an end. The money had run out: to be clear, it had never been there to begin with. I was headed back to work.

This time instead of an office across the street where I would be home promptly at 5:15, I was going to be in Washington D.C. The train ride would put me home at 7:00, only an hour before my daughter was supposed to go to bed. Still, it was what had to be done.

So, like a trooper, I left my wailing daughter in the arms of my exhausted husband, just home from the night shift he works since we can not afford day care, and boarded the train. Thirteen hours later I returned home in time to nurse my daughter and put her to sleep. After she was safely nestled in bed I sat on the couch and sobbed, positive that she would never forgive me for this misdirection of my energy, betrayal of our special time together.

The next morning I went to her crib, expecting her to be grumpy. Instead I was treated to a beatific smile, a look that said to me, "I love you mommy, and I know you are just doing what you have to do."

Narrator

This is the Immanuel moment—when we come face to face with God's presence, when chaos resolves to the singular beauty of a toothless grin that is offered for no other reason than the pure joy of togetherness. How many times did Yeshua's toothless grin pull Miryam and Yosef out of their aching heads and carry them back to Immanuel—God with us? Back into the pure experience and abandon of their love?

Gillian Hefer writes of just such a moment:

Reader4

I love you
enough to do anything for you.
Give my life,
my love, my heart,
my soul to you and for you.

Enough to willingly give all my effort, trust, and prayers to you.
Enough to want to protect and comfort you.
Enough to want the best for you
to wish for your successes.

Enough to keep my promises,
to cherish you, respect you.
Enough to fight for you,
compromise for you,
sacrifice for you.

Enough to miss you incredibly when we're apart,
no matter what length of time or distance.

Enough to believe in our family
to never give up on us.
Enough to never want to leave you or live without you.

I love you this much.

Narrator

If we who are imperfect know how to love and give good things to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven love and give good things to us? Our children inspire us to heights of selfless love and devotion that we never thought possible—that we never knew existed within us until tiny fingers touch a spot no fully grown hand could ever reach.

And that surge of euphoric joy in bringing life into the world, the gratitude for having the privilege of being chosen to nurture and guard that precious life and watch it grow is exactly the image Immanuel uses to express—in terms we can just begin to understand—a portion of the power and extent of God's love for each of *us*—*his* children.

What child has this power? Every child—if we are willing to see Immanuel in his or her eyes. Yeshua was Immanuel to Miryam and Yosef, but also to anyone and everyone who took the time to really know him. He is Immanuel to each one of us today who takes that same time to know him. He is God with us, the light of the world. And that light illuminates each heart that is transformed by connection with him, and then through each of us, lights the way for anyone who crosses our path. From a single source to many points and back again always describes the flow of God's love.

(Instructions for candle lighting.)

Music Up

What Child is This?

Strange Way to Save the World

Narrator

There are few songs like this one written from Yosef's point of view—which is why I love it so much. But though he is often lost in Yeshua's and Miryam's glow, Yosef is the strong, silent presence and support of his family. Yosef reminds us of the Father's love—silent and unseen—allowing *others* to take center stage and explore their dreams to the full...all the while, fully content to smile in the wings, providing both nest and launch pad for the fulfillment of his family. Yosef is our model of the unseen love of one who stands beside us, guides and protects without intrusion or condition.

Robert J. Sankey writes of such a father's love:

Reader3

I want to describe how I felt....

when my wife first told me she was pregnant.

when she first began to show a little bulge.

when she called me from work one day to tell me she was on the way to the emergency room because she had suddenly started to bleed and was hooked up to monitors for three hours.

when the doctors finally told us she and the baby would be ok.

when I saw the baby on the sonogram for the first time, heard the baby's heartbeat, and saw her move.

when my wife said she *felt* the baby move.

when I felt and saw the baby move.

when I saw the growth of my baby each month on the sonograms.

when we found out the baby would be a girl.

when we decided on her name--Kaitlynn Michelle.

when my wife told me it was time, and it was 3 weeks early.

when I had to watch my wife in pain for 13 hours knowing there was nothing I could do.

when the monitors went crazy and the doctors said they had to do a c-section.

when I stood there holding my wife's hand as the doctors cut her to take the baby and telling her everything was alright and praying with all my heart and soul that I wasn't lying.

when the baby was out and my wife was being stitched, I was looking into her eyes telling her how much I loved her.

I want to describe how I felt...

when we heard the first cry of our baby.

when I held Kaitlynn for the first time.

when I watched Kaitlynn eat for the first time.

when we brought her home.

when I was holding her one week later and she began to have seizures.

when I watched her hooked up to machines for a week, crying and screaming unable to pick her up because of the wires.

when we took her home again knowing she would be ok in time.

when she looked at me and I realized that she really recognized me.

when she smiled at me the first time and I knew it was a real smile.

when she laughed the first time just this week.

when she reached for me to pick her up today and I knew it wasn't just another uncontrollable action.

I want to describe how I felt...

...but I can't. There are no words.

Narrator

Sometimes there are no words to describe what our spirits know. And the irony is that our spirits know what our minds sometimes can't comprehend. Our own spirits, God's spirit, Immanuel, are all trying to teach our minds these deep things so that we may begin to see life as Immanuel sees it.

God with us sees beautiful chaos even in a premature birth or a sick child. God with us sees points of light and connection even in the most difficult and breathless situations. God with us sees unexpected gifts in the impossible schedules we exhaust ourselves trying to keep in order to raise our children; keep them in school; get to one, two, or sometimes three jobs to keep the lights on; ferry children and the children of our friends to endless events; make bottles, change diapers, clean rooms, prepare meals, wash up after meals, give baths, tuck little bodies under sheets, and fall into bed knowing that as soon as we close our eyes, in an instant it will seem to be starting all over again.

But there is beauty in the chaos. There is profound significance in the smallest detail. Our lives are *made* of details. Have you realized that? We live life one detail at a time. To miss the details is to miss our lives. To be constantly looking beyond this moment's detail in search of something significant, is to dismiss the *whole* of our lives. We don't live on mountaintops—we live in the valleys of our details.

The best of these beautiful stories from parents living their lives with their children are about the tiniest things... Moments where they have seen God with us in details that often seem too insignificant or too familiar to fully consider. And yet such details, every detail in our lives, holds the fullness of all creation: Immanuel. It's up to us to see. It always has been.

Kate Geiselman writes of such a moment:

Reader2

I am awakened by a tiny squeak, and the distinctive, crackling sound of the disposable diaper on my squirming baby. I open one eye, just to check. It's only a stretch--she's sound asleep--tiny, rosebud lips moving rhythmically, sucking on a dream-nipple. Does she remember the darkness? The swish of the warm water? The sound of my heart? Being pushed abruptly into a cold, bright, loud place? The first words I said to her were, "I'm sorry."

But now, as she lies beside me in the pre-dawn darkness, I have no apologies. I rub her stomach gently, feeling her small chest rise and fall beneath her yellow sleeper. Our bodies warm the bed, and on her face is the blissful peace only babies know.

I have to get up in half an hour. I have to go to work. I have to put gas in the car. I have to get groceries. I have to catch up.

She sighs in her sleep, and her baby thumb stumbles to her mouth. Suddenly, I don't have to do anything at all. Her oblivion is contagious. The only thing I have to do is be her mother, and, much to my surprise, it's the easiest thing I've ever done. Despite the sleepless nights, the fears, and the messy details of caring for a totally dependent human being, loving her is like breathing: automatic and life-sustaining.

"You will never know," I whisper to her in the dark, and as I look at her perfect, dimpled hand, I realize that she will never love me the same way I love her. Every mother loves more than she is loved. I feel no sadness or envy at this realization—it just comes to me as an absolute truth—like suddenly noticing that the sky is blue, and it has been all along, and I just haven't been paying attention.

Pale light seeps in through the bedroom window. I don't want to move. I don't want to get up. I don't want to leave her. I bury my nose in the pink folds of her neck and inhale deeply. This will have to sustain me for the day, so I savor her scent, lingering as long as I can. Later, while I'm miles away, I will be able to summon it up during a rare, quiet moment and pretend that she is with me.

Fueled by baby-smell, I go to the window and open the blinds. The stars are fading, and the sky today is a crisp, clear blue.

Narrator

Fueled by baby-smell, we can move out into the unknown and chaos of our lives and never lose sight of the beauty that is always equally present. Fueled by baby-smell, we can carry our atmosphere of Immanuel around with us as a diver carries around his oxygen. Fueled by baby-smell, we can live our lives never far from the remembrance of our *own* childhood that keeps us close to Kingdom.

Miryam and Yosef were parents. *We* are parents. Miryam and Yosef found Immanuel in the unlikeliest of circumstances. *We* can do that too, if we so desire. There is a bond, a sameness between us and this holy family that we share as humans living with little humans. Our stories are their story, and their story is ours. To miss that, to miss entering into Immanuel here and now is to entirely miss the point of this greatest story ever told—which is our story, the story we find ourselves in—every day, every moment, and every detail of our beautiful chaos.

And now, speaking of chaos... (Intro choir/children.)

Music Up

Silent Night/Jingle Bells/Joy to the World

Narrator

Closing prayer