

**CHRISTMAS CHARACTERS:
LIFE LESSONS FROM THE 'LESSER' KNOWN CHARACTERS
IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY:
JOSEPH AND MARY:
"EVERYTHING IS CRACKED"**

Over the past 3 weeks we have been discussing some of the life lessons from some of the lesser-known characters in the Christmas story. We studied Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's aunt, John the Baptist's parents. We looked at John the Baptist and his unique role of 'preparing' for the introduction of the Bride and the Bridegroom. Last Sunday we spent some time considering the shepherds and their unique role in the development of this familiar story. Tonight we'll spend a bit of time with Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus. Obviously Jesus is the star of the story and the focus of our time together this season, and especially this night. But there is much to learn from looking at his parents, and their interesting part of this intriguing story; which appears quite differently in two of the Gospels. Let me show you.

"In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be frightened, Mary," the angel told her, "for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's already in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." _

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true." And the angel left. Luke 1:26-38

Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, being a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace her publicly. As he considered this, he fell asleep, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this happened to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded. He brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

Mt.1: 18-25

Edna Hong's book, Bright Valley of Love, is the true story of a physically challenged child who found a haven of love. Gunther was born near the end of World War I. His father was away at war. His mother would not care for him because he was deformed, suffering from a severe case of Rickets. His grandmother, who begrudgingly took him in, hated him and was embarrassed by his deformity. She kept him locked up, out of sight and away from people. No one talked to him. No one answered his cries. They merely changed him and fed him when it was convenient. At age six he couldn't talk and his deformity, which increased in severity due to lack of sunshine and milk, prevented him from walking.

His father returned from the war, met and married a new wife. When she too refused to have anything to do with Gunther, the grandmother insisted he be institutionalized. The family left him at Bethel, a Christian home for epileptics as well as physically and mentally challenged youth.

With the loving care of the staff and with the help of an epileptic roommate, named Kurt, Gunther began to learn how to talk and thus began to learn about life. It was Kurt who told Gunther about Christmas. The story of Jesus' birth and the love of God filled Gunther with joy. But there was something else that filled him with fear - little Kurt, his best friend, was getting worse. In fact, he told Gunther one night that he would soon be going to his heavenly home, maybe as early as Christmas time.

On the first Sunday of Advent, when Bethel's Chaplain, whom the children all affectionately called, Uncle Pastor began their Advent service; the joy and excitement of the day wiped out their fears. When the moment came for the Advent candle to be lit, little Kurt was chosen to do the honors. The children watched expectantly as Kurt took the lighted candle and leaned toward the unlighted candle of the Advent wreath. But suddenly, the burning candle dropped. A moan burst from Kurt's lips and his body writhed in spasm after spasm of an epileptic seizure. One of the nurses quickly took him in her arms and left the room. Uncle Pastor rescued the cracked, but still burning candle and lit the wreath, singing as he did so. The staff and children joined in...until a shrill cry emerged from the heart of Gunther's fear. The song stopped and Gunther screamed, "There's a crack in everything."

Every face in the room turned and looked at Gunther, but Gunther looked only at one face, the face of Uncle Pastor. Once again he flung his wild desperate complaint against that face saying, "There is a crack in everything!" And then he added, "What is so great about Christmas?"

The silence of the room ached with Gunther's pain. Finally, Uncle Pastor turned from Gunther and appealed to the other children saying, "Gunther needs to know what is so great about Christmas. Will you help me tell him please?"

Manford, a child with a mind for mathematics said, "Christmas comes in December. December is the 12th Month. Christmas comes on the 25th day. The 25th day of the 12 month." "So it does," said Uncle Pastor. "Thank you, Manford."

Monica jumped to her feet, beamed at Uncle Pastor and spoke the only words in her vocabulary, "Alleluia, Oh Susanna!" And then she sat down.

"Thank you, Monica." Said the pastor. "Can anyone else tell Gunther what is so great about Christmas?"

Peter, the oldest of the patients there, but with a mental age of only five said, "Christmas is so great 'cause then God sent his son, Jesus our Savior." Uncle Pastor said, "That's true, Peter. Thank you...but why? Children, why did God send his son to be our Savior?"

Finally, Leni, a severely handicapped little girl climbed from her chair to the table top and shouted, 'Because...Because everything has a crack!'

Uncle Pastor said, "It is true, Gunther, that there is a crack in everything. God sees the crack better than we do, and the crack is ever so much worse than we think it is. That is why God sent his son. Not to patch up the crack. But to make everything new. That is why Christmas is so great!"

Joseph and Mary knew that everything they had hoped and planned, prepared, and anticipated had just been cracked. This imploding pregnancy has sent their lives into a tailspin. She could be sentenced to death for getting pregnant while engaged; he could be ruined and have his reputation shattered by sticking with this soiled woman. And what would become of their illegitimate son...yes indeed, everything is cracked, everything is broken.

Our world is at war, again, with terrorists who are governed by hatred and hopelessness. Our country is divided not so much by the Democrats and Republicans as by the haves and have-nots. Our lives are filled with fear and worry, while we sing about Peace on Earth, Good will to all! Everything is cracked!

But that, my friends, is exactly why Jesus came, and why we come again to this familiar service, in this familiar place; that's what's so great about Christmas. In the midst of our broken and cracked lives, God comes to make us new! He doesn't come help us help ourselves become better; he comes to save us, often from ourselves. In the midst of our broken and cracked hope for a secure and peaceful existence, God comes to restore our hope and renew our joy. He doesn't come to gloss over our problems, or paint a rosy picture, but to return us to Himself, and give us HIS peace.

Our lives are broken and cracked in a hundred different ways, and God wants to make them all new! Maybe you are facing this season without your soul mate for the first time...there is not much harder than that. Maybe you are facing this event with a loved one in harms way tonight, there is not much scarier than that. Maybe you are facing Christmas alone, there is not much sadder than that. Maybe you are facing this Christmas without Jesus; there is nothing more troubling than that.

Cracked and broken, in a hundred; shoot, 400 different ways, with only one-way to be fixed. From Nazareth on a donkey, or in a Mercedes to Calvary, the only way to fix our brokenness is with a visit to a manger, at the foot of the cross.

I beg you tonight, receive Jesus as your Savior, invite Him in to your Inn! He alone can fix our brokenness, and mend the cracked up mess we have made of our lives. Whether for the first or fiftieth time, 'come adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King.' We are all handicapped, and broken, sin only adds to the situation, and tonight, we can be born again, by receiving this newborn King. So...let us pray.