

## Hold Me Together

1. Warm-up question: Sunday's sermon began with a challenge to identify the first lines spoken in several famous movies, including "Rosebud" (*Citizen Kane*) and "You don't like to fly do you?" (*Die Hard*). What's one of your all-time favorite movies?
2. The opening lines in *Tale of Two Cities* is, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." That pretty much sums up what Mary, mother of Jesus, experienced on the first Christmas. We began by focusing on the terrible things that happened to Mary in and around the birth of Jesus: her impending marriage almost fell apart; she had to flee Nazareth to escape the pressures of being pregnant before marriage; later she and Joseph had to travel 90 miles to Bethlehem when she was almost due; when she went into labor, there was no room in the inn; she had to give birth in a barn; then she and Joseph had to flee to Egypt to escape King Herod's efforts to kill Jesus. It was one thing after another piling on top of one another.
  - a. When Joseph heard about Mary's pregnancy, he threatened divorce. For those who've been divorced, describe for others the pain you felt when everything was first falling apart.
  - b. Mary had to flee her home village of Nazareth to escape the gossip and judgment of being pregnant out of wedlock. In your own life, when have you felt most shamed and ostracized? What did that feel like?
  - c. For those who've been pregnant, describe what it might feel like to travel 90 miles on a donkey for 4 days for 8 hours each day when 7-9 months pregnant.
  - d. To get away from King Herod, Mary and Joseph had to leave everything behind and flee to a foreign land where they lived as refugees. Have you ever known a refugee? Did they tell you how it felt to leave everything behind? Did they describe how they felt when they first arrived here?
  - e. For Mary, it was one terrible thing after another piling on top of her. What are some things piling on top of you right now? How does that feel?
3. Thankfully, Mary's story doesn't end with the parade of horrors we've just discussed. Read Luke 2:1-14, as printed on p. 3, then pick up with the next question.
4. Something wonderful and beautiful emerged from each grave challenge Mary faced. Her marriage almost fell apart, but then it didn't when Joseph managed to believe her. Mary had to flee Nazareth but was embraced by her Aunt Elizabeth. Mary had to ride a donkey 90 miles and give birth in a barn, but there were angels in the sky rejoicing. Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt, but first God sent Wise Men with priceless gifts they could sell to support them along the way. So that over and over again, out of great hardship came great beauty. It was the worst of times; it was the best of times. From all this we drew three lessons. First, accept the fact that every season in

- life is going to be both beautiful and brutal. Don't make the mistake of putting your life on hold until everything is good, because that time will never come. ***Instead, find the beauty in what is now and trust that God will get you through the brutality.***
- a. It's rare to have a season in life with no serious challenges. Tell us about the best season in your life so far. Did you nonetheless face serious challenges during that time? If so, what was the biggest challenge during that time?
  - b. Tell us about the hardest season in your life so far. Did you nevertheless experience beauty during that difficult time? Tell us about something beautiful that happened during that time.
  - c. Dorothy Sayers says, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a medium for creation." When Carla Waterman relayed that quote to a friend facing hard times, Carla went on to say, "Maybe it's time to drop your sword and pick up your paint brush." What do you think Carla meant? Is there a challenge in your life right now where God is calling you to drop your sword and pick up your paint brush? Tell us about it.
5. We are often the victim of the simplistic notion that God causes everything to happen, therefore, God is to blame for everything. But that's not what the Bible teaches. Jeff said, "The Bible teaches that God has deliberately placed us in a zone of free will. That means everybody gets to make choices that are real. Lots of times we and others make bad choices that have terrible consequences for self and others. If every time somebody was about to do something bad, God intervened to stop it, we'd become mere puppets able to do only what God allows. God loved us enough to give us the unspeakable gift of being real. But the flip side of that is, there are a whole lot of things that will happen in this world that God doesn't want. Yet, instead of giving up on us, God specializes in trying to find ways to bring good from bad." Which brings us to the next lesson: ***Stop blaming God for everything, and start working with God to transform everything.***
- a. Romans 8:28 says, "For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Does this verse mean that God causes everything to happen? If not, what does it mean? Explain your answer.
  - b. The promise of Romans 8:28 is "for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." This suggests that, for the promise to become reality, we have to a role to play in partnering with God. What is that role?
6. The final lesson we drew from Mary's experiences on the first Christmas was: ***Recognize that suffering always has the potential to be redemptive.*** What do you think that means? When in your life have you been on the giving or receiving end of redemptive suffering?

## **Luke 2:1-14**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people!'