

CRIBB<S>NOTE

Do you believe the Christmas story? Almost every aspect of the narrative seems beyond the realm of possibility. A virgin has a baby. An angel appears in a dream. A child is given a name that means “God is with us,” and “the one who will save us.” In Matthew we read the story from the perspective of David, the man who marries the mother of Jesus. In Luke, a more detailed account is given from the viewpoint of Mary, Jesus’ mother. Both New Testament gospel stories take us to places where we are required to experience the readings from a distance dissimilar to our everyday activities. Can you believe what is written?

The starting point of our faith as Christians is where we are given the most unbelievable circumstances and we are encouraged to receive, ponder, imagine, and become what is laid out for us to embrace. It is so remarkable many people find it too hard to accept.

In the days and weeks that comprise the Holiday Season, the Biblical stories of Jesus’ birth are lost or shoved aside. Of course, many places erect the Nativity Scene with the Holy Family surrounded by animals and visitors, but more often we are inundated with symbols of Santa Clause, elves, and wintry scenes of snow people and mistletoe. Christmas music fills the air with “Winter Wonderland,” “Jingle Bells,” and “White Christmas,” much more than “Emanuel,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and other sacred anthems.

It’s seems much easier to create a holiday with toys, gifts, and gadgets on display rather than reflect on the meaning of a bizarre story about sages, shepherds, and a poor, immigrant family forced to leave their home to register for the mandatory census and to pay taxes to an occupying, imperialist government. Yet, that is how the story of Jesus’ birth unfolds.

The other night my wife, Kana, asked, “How old was Mary when Jesus was born?”

“We don’t know for sure,” I began my reply. “But she was probably 14 years old,” I said. According to many Bible commentators, Mary could have been 14 to 17 years old at the time the Angel appeared to her and told her she would give birth to a son. The writer of the Gospel of Luke provides some insight into her response. She accepted the condition that could have cost her life.

Matthew records how Joseph received the news and how he was ready to leave her. An unmarried woman who was pregnant could have been stoned to death in that society. Even today we are witnessing what the international community calls a “barbaric” and “harsh” reaction to a woman who was raped in Saudi Arabia. She was jailed and flogged because she had been alone in a car with a man.

That nation deals with such trauma very differently from what we in the West might expect in that situation. This modern day episode can help us understand what might have happened to Mary if Joseph had divorced her and stated his reasons publicly.

The story of Christmas is fascinating. We do not have to imagine very hard in order to capture the significance of the dramatic events described in the gospels. A young, unwed, pregnant woman, who found herself away from home in a strange land, was in need of shelter and healthcare.

It happened then and it continues to happen now; perhaps more often than we want to admit. Left to make her own way with only her husband to comfort her, Mary sought compassion, assistance, and relief. It is the familiar saga among immigrants, the poor, the lonely, and many pregnant teenagers. It is the story of Christmas. It is how God intervenes and gives us a sign of divine love.