



God is nowhere

What do the following letters spell? God is nowhere.

Some will say, “God is nowhere.” But the exact same sequence of letters can be read as, “God is now here.” Perspective really does matter.

At the time of Mary’s conception, the reassuring sense of the presence of God is so manifest, so evident, that it is easy for her to say, “God is now here.” Indeed, the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55 is Mary’s great expression of adoration to God as she marvels at the work of God in her life. In no small part it is Mary’s exultation that God remembers her and walks with her.

But then the days go by. And the weeks. And the months. There is no record of any further angelic confirmation. No record of any evident experiences with God. In fact, the next words Mary and Joseph hear come not from a messenger of God at all but instead from a harsh emperor uttering a decree for a census. They are forced to leave home when Mary is nearly at full term.

What a turn of events. As the birth of Jesus approaches, God seems so hidden, so obscured, so silent. Remember the difficulties:

- Mary and Joseph endure months of innuendo. God, why aren’t you defending us?
- The decree to go to Bethlehem puts them on a 70-mile, three-day journey over a rocky road, presumably on a donkey. God, what’s going on?
- The actual moment of any birth is unpredictable, so at least when they left Nazareth, they left with the outside hope that they could waddle down to Bethlehem, take care of business, and toddle back to Nazareth and family before the baby would actually be born. But with the onset of labor, the hope of being in familiar surroundings with family is taken away. God, are you here?
- When they get to Bethlehem there is not even a place for them to stay. The best they can do is share space with some animals in a stable, near a feeding trough that would double as a crib once the child is born. God, did we hear you right?

From the height of sensing the presence of God at conception, to the sense of being all alone at the time of the birth itself. No royal

trappings. No remarkable miracles of God. Just tough times, hardship, and the sound of deafening silence from heaven.

Sometimes we think that if we are following God, it should be all angels and visions and spiritual blessings one after another. But the reality is when we follow God there will be plenty of seasons when simply persevering is the way forward.

Think about this for a moment. What if when Mary conceived, the angel said: “And now we’re going to move you into a palace, you’ll have servants, people will wait on you hand and foot your entire pregnancy, and we’ll set you up with a spa membership.”

Well, in Mary’s mind it could have easily shifted from being about the baby to being about her. You see, when we think it is supposed to be all blessing all the time, even faith can become self-centered.

But it is perseverance even during the silence that our faith is proven real. When the silence and the hardship could have easily caused Mary and Joseph to conclude that God is nowhere, in their brokenness they persist, believing that even in the darkness, even in the cold, even in the stable, even in the smells, even in the hay, God is now here.

God is not absent in silence. Silence does not mean abandonment. Indeed, there are some 700 years between some of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and their actual fulfillment. There are 400 years alone between the end of the Old Testament and the events of the birth of the Messiah. Through it all, however, circumstances were being orchestrated by the hidden hand of God for the timely coming of the Prince of Peace.

I pray that during this Advent season your sense of God’s presence is manifest and evident like it was for Mary at the time of conception. But if you feel more like Mary at the time of birth, take heart. The One born to Mary remains Immanuel, God with us. Yes indeed, God is now here.

And the time will then come soon enough when the shepherds, and the angels, and the wise men will attest to the fruit of your faithfulness. ■

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