

Thinking outside the manger

**Women's ministry devotional
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We love the manger and all that it stands for. It is the beginning of hope in our lives. What if we were to take a step back and look at how each person depicted in the nativity, reacted or felt and applied that to our own lives? Let us think and learn to "think outside the manger."

A great way to present this devotional is to use a nativity set and hold up each person as you are speaking about them. You may not have some of the people, and will have to improvise on some of them.

Zachariah

Read : Scripture

Luke 1:5-22 New King James Version (NKJV)

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to

him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, ^[a] and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

¹⁹ And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.

²⁰ But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."

²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple. ²² But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

The birth of Jesus begins with this man, Zachariah. Zachariah was a man who was old. He and his wife had no children and they prayed for one so that they would not be shamed in their community. It was a shameful thing not to be able to produce a son to be able to give all that you had worked for in life.

When he was visited by the angel, the angel reassured him to not be afraid, and that he would have a son who would be the forerunner to

the Messiah. Can you believe it? After all of this time, he had been praying for years to have a son of any sort and now this angel is telling him that he was going to be having a child who was going to be the forerunner to the Messiah! But when he was told, he did not believe. Even though he had been praying for years for this, he doubted that it would ever happen.

Instead of rising to faith.....he sinks to doubt!

From his lack of faith, he was unable to speak for nine months. Those nine months must have felt like an eternity. But during this quiet time of being able to listen to God and reflect upon what was told to him, his heart changed. From this he birthed out a new son(through his wife) and God filled him with the Holy Spirit. He then prophesied from the Word of God. From those moments of silence is when he was able to listen to God the best.

Isn't it interesting that God begins the greatest event in all of the world with silence?

How Zachariah relates to us

We need not be filled with unbelief that God can do anything.

Do we nurture an attitude of disbelief? If so, read Psalm 51---David's prayer of repentance. Ask God to create a new heart, renew within you a steadfast spirit, and release the joy of salvation.

Psalm 51

*Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your loving kindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,*

Blot out my transgressions.

² *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.*

³ *For I acknowledge my transgressions,
And my sin is always before me.*

⁴ *Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done this evil in Your sight—
That You may be found just when You speak,^[a]
And blameless when You judge.*

⁵ *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.*

⁶ *Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,
And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.*

⁷ *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

⁸ *Make me hear joy and gladness,
That the bones You have broken may rejoice.*

⁹ *Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.*

¹⁰ *Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

¹¹ *Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.*

¹² *Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.*

¹³ *Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners shall be converted to You.*

¹⁴ *Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
The God of my salvation,
And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.*

¹⁵ *O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.*

¹⁶ *For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it;*

*You do not delight in burnt offering.
17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.*

*18 Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
19 Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness,
With burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then they shall offer bulls on Your altar.*

Don't ever despise the quiet times in your life. Those quiet times are when God can birth something great from inside of you.

Ask the women:

Are you like Zachariah and in need of a season of quietness this Christmas season? Do you need to seek the Lord more consistently through prayer and reading of God's Word? Ask the Lord to show you more time in your day to be able to spend with Him.

Mary

Read scripture:

Luke 1:26-33

²⁶ Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"^[a]

²⁹ But when she saw him,^[b] she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Now we have Mary. Mary was probably a very unsuspecting person to give birth to the greatest person who ever lived on the earth. She was a poor girl, from an insignificant town. But the bible says that she had a heart that trusted God. It says that she was the Lord's servant. To be the Lord's servant is not something you say "ok, sure God I'll do that task." No being the Lords servant is something to be chosen to live your life as.

When the angel of the Lord came to her and spoke, she didn't immediately question. The bible says that she pondered the words.

How hard it is for us, when being confronted with some bizarre news, immediately start speaking out how we disagree with it? We question God, we ask for more answers, or we doubt things. We don't do as the bible says and control our tongues. What if we thought and "pondered" more before we spoke things out into existence. When we believe things that are told to us, it releases our faith and yields it to God. That is when God can start doing all of the work.

Now that she was told these things and believed them in her heart the true test of faith begins. Here she was betrothed to a man, supposed to be a virgin and now she was pregnant. She had to approach her husband-to-be and share this news with him. She is at first was rejected by the man whom she is going to love. What sort of feelings and emotions do you think came upon her? Being shamed by her community and possibly her family. Being ridiculed and judged by those who didn't even know her. This is a true testimony of how Mary trusted the Lord that He would take care of it all.

Now that she got through those nine months, the time came to give birth. She had to travel through a miserable time, riding on a donkey being pregnant. She was carrying the Savior of the world and it was through an uncomfortable journey to get to where she could finally rest. Then not being offered a comfortable place to give birth to this King, instead he was born in a stable. Among all of the yuck of the world, she gave birth to someone amazing.

God told her, she believed, and she birthed something great!

Ask the women:

Are you like Mary, in that God has given a vision or a dream to you and you doubt that God can make it come to pass? Do the things He tells you, seem impossible to make happen? Does the journey that God has placed you on, seem like a rough ride and possibly and uncomfortable yucky ended like Mary had? Hold tight----Stand firm in your faith and let God produce a miracle out of you! Don't doubt the enormity of what God can do through you when you are obedient to his words. .

Joseph

Read scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

²⁴ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.^[a] And he called His name JESUS.

Next is Joseph. Here we have someone who exemplifies being a man who is strong and courageous. When he was told the news by Mary, instead of telling her to "get lost," he decided not to disgrace her. He was going to just put her away secretly, otherwise if he married her it would show that they had had premarital sex and been disgraced together. He could have, according to custom, had her stoned to death but instead he chose, even before God spoke to him to be kind and show mercy to her. Shows much about his character. Then when the angel appeared to him, he accepted what he was to do. He paid a high price for choosing to stay with Mary. He probably received much scorn from his friends and family. His reputation probably got tarnished among the people and he might even have lost a few friends.

That all sounds like much to endure but then, he married Mary. As scripture says, "the Messiah was be birthed from a virgin." He then had to live with Mary, sleeping next to her for months without knowing her. That would be a hard task, one of HUGE self control of his desires. He was a normal, healthy young man with desires and urges I might think and to do this, would tell much about his character.

Then after giving birth to Jesus, Joseph had the pressure and challenge to protect God's son. Can you imagine how high of a regard that would be? Especially as scriptures states it was a life threatening time, that was a mighty task to endure.! God knew the type of man required to carry the burden of taking care of his children.

Ask the women:

Are you like Joseph, experiencing a time of stress and anxiety during the holiday season? Do you need wisdom and strength to deal with the things of life that you are going through? Joseph is a person to model your life after---if anyone was given a stressful situation to handle, he did it with wisdom and strength that can only come from the Lord. The bible says that when we ask for wisdom he is faithful and just to give it us. The question is....are we ready and willing to receive?.

Inn keeper

The bible does not say much about the innkeeper so I am going to put my own spin on how he may have reacted to this situation.

After reaching Bethlehem after a long exhausting trip, his wife ready to give birth, Joseph asks for a room. Possibly after hearing that there were no rooms available he might of explained that this child, which would be born, would be great! But instead of having sympathy or even considering giving up his own room, he told him there were no rooms available. Can you imagine sending a pregnant woman on her way when she was ready to give birth? Heartless or too busy! Instead he sends them to the stable.

What a huge opportunity missed by being too busy with the temporary cares of the day.

Ask the women:

Are you like the innkeeper, keeping your schedule so full of activities this holiday season that you forget what is the most important gift of all? There are so many activities, cookies to bake, cards to write, crafts to make, presents to shop for and wrap, and parties to attend that the "real" reason for the season can become overlooked. Take the time to say "no" to a few extra things that are crowding up your schedule. Simplify some of the ways that you do things. Don't worry about having everything "so perfect." Relax a bit, take time for the Savior, and the rest will all fall into place.

Angel

We have multiple references in Bible about the angels given the job of proclaiming the good news. They approached Zachariah, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds, I know that the angels are not mortal beings but to be giving the task of sharing good news with people has to be exciting. I think of the job that Ty Pennington has on *Extreme Home Makeover*, what a great place to be! Here you have these stories of people just being pushed through the wringer of life and he gets to tell them that their life is about to change physically for the better. You can see the joys in the eyes and through the tears of the people. Knowing you are doing something to help better their life, now that is a good job to have!

Sharing all the good that God has done in your life and how God will do it for someone else, is the greatest gift you can give to someone. We need to look for opportunities to worship the Lord and serve as His messenger to the lost of this world.

Ask the women:

Do you need to be more like the angels and take the time to worship the Lord and share the goodness that He brings—especially during this stressful, sometimes chaotic time of life? One of the best things you can do is take the TIME to do something nice for someone else. Maybe it will be to sit and just listen to someone. Maybe it will be to bless someone financially this holiday season. If you know in your heart that you should be helping someone else, even in a small task---do it! God will show you what you need to do. Something even as little as buying a cup of coffee for a worker out on the streets this holiday, will go a

long way. Don't underestimate small gestures of blessings. You don't know what people go through or what they need, but *God* does.

Shepherds

Read scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

*¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"^d*

¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸ And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

The first people chosen to hear about the birth of the Messiah were the lowly shepherds. These guys were not significant people at all. They spent the majority of their days worshipping God while out tending their flocks. Not out doing some great ministry job. It shows that God chooses the humblest in spirit to do His work. It is no surprise that God chose these people to proclaim the news of His son's birth.

We should never disregard our self as never being not good enough for God. God is looking for those with a pure heart to be able to do His work. That is it! He doesn't care what type of profession you are in, your social status, your age, or how much money you make----he just wants you.

After seeing and being confirmed that the baby was born, they rejoiced and spread the good news. They were excited for what God had done.

Ask the women:

Do you need to appreciate that God wants to bestows his favor on you? It does not matter what your situation is in life, what matters is that you WANT to serve God. He will make all of those problems and negative things in your life, work out for His glory. Do you need to stop complaining about all of the bad going on in your life and instead start speaking the goodness that God bestows upon you? Stop focusing on the negative and start focusing on the positive things. Life will get much better!

Lamb

There isn't any scripture reference if sheep were part of the nativity or not, again I am using my own information on this.

Think of the nature of a little lamb. It skips along happily just as a child would be like in life. No cares of this world, just happily being led by its shepherd. Trusts in him completely, with no worries of the day.

If the lamb went with the shepherds to see the baby Jesus, he might have been able to snuggle up next to the baby and kept him warm. He would of enjoyed sleeping happily all cozy up next to the Savior.

The Bible says we are to have a child-like faith to enter into the kingdom of God. Think of the nature of a child.....children don't question much. You can tell them something and they believe it. How many parents tell their children about Santa Claus and all that he can do and they just accept it as a fact? Now let's reverse that to us as adults. How many times do we read scripture and doubt it can happen?

Ask the women:

Do you need to reclaim your child-like faith to be able to trust God and to grow in wonder, freedom and delight with your Savior? Do you need to be released from all of the wrong things that you have been ingrained with that go against scripture? When you read the Bible, do you think that it is not for today and that God doesn't do what He did back then? Just as Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary did----you need to BELIEVE so that you can RECEIVE what it is God has for you in your life. It takes an act of FAITH to believe something. You may not see

it, but if *God* says it, you must not doubt it. Believe so that you can receive!

Donkey

The only scripture reference is that the donkey carried Mary along the journey to Bethlehem. This is my take on the life of the donkey.

This donkey had a hard journey to take. He knew that the end result would be in a stable with fresh soft hay that he could lay down and rest in but he first had to endure to get to that point. He had to walk through rocky terrain, up and down mountains, and he probably was a little inconvenienced by not having enough to drink along the way.

The real hardship was to carry the baggage brought along on this journey. The heavy baggage that was strapped onto his body felt like a ton of bricks was put on his back. Then, to top it all off, they put this pregnant women on top of him! Here he was carrying the weight of the world on his back, traveling along rocky crags, and not seeing the end in sight for quite some time. All this poor little donkey looked forward to, was that soft straw that was lying in the manger.

Ask the women:

Has God called you to do a task and you need encouragement from feeling weighed down with the heavy baggage of your calling in life? Know that the end is near. He will provide a season of rest. He will give you a resting ground, a place where you can take off all that baggage and lie down next to the Savior in that soft fresh hay.

Magi or wise men

Read scripture: Matthew 2:7-12

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

The bible says that the star guided the wise men to the baby, but it took some time. We have been taught that they arrived at the stable to see the baby Jesus, but that is not what the bible says. It just makes the story sound good☺

Also we don't know if it was three men. The bible says "men" which means plural of one. It could have been 50, or 10 or 2. Tradition teaches us that it was three because they brought three gifts to Jesus.

These men picked out three gifts to give to the Savior. They chose:

- Gold-----representative of a King
- Frankincense-----used by priests and represents prayer
- Myrrh---used in embalming bodies—prophetic of his death

These three things represents all that Jesus stood for as a man:

Prophet

Priest

King

Ask the women:

Are you so particular that you are careful to pick out presents for everyone this season but you forget to offer gifts to Jesus? The Bible says whatever you do, do it in my name. Is there someone this season that you can offer the gift of Jesus to? Maybe it will be to really listen to what someone wants this holiday season. Ask the Lord to reveal to you a way that you can help someone by giving the "perfect" gift.

Summary

We shouldn't get too wrapped up and idolize the birth of Jesus. That is not what Christmas time is about. It is about sharing with unbelievers this gift of what Jesus is. Who He is and what He stands for is what is going to change people. We have learned that when these biblical people believed what the Lord had told them, that is when they received what God said. We as believers need to not doubt all that God can do. If He tells you something or you read the scriptures, we need to believe that it will come to pass. The bible says in Luke 1:4-5:

Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.

Believe and be blessed!!!

**Group leaders you can make or buy a simple ornament and attach this bible verse and saying to it as a reminder for the ladies of what you studied. Will make a great inexpensive take home gift for the meeting.