

Before today's story, the angel Gabriel made a big, surprise announcement to an unwed teenage virgin that she would give birth to God's son and name him Jesus. Gabriel didn't make this announcement to Herod's daughter or a member of elite Jewish society; he made it to a poor, small town Jewish girl named Mary. This Advent story "reminds us that God moves in and among those whom society most often leaves behind, that the thread of redemption woven throughout Scripture winds its way through a lot of small towns and seemingly little lives. Nazareth was such a backwater town that the first thing Nathanael, a disciple who speaks in John's Gospel, said about Jesus was, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth (1:46)'" (*The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling)? And yet, this is the kind of town in which the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Son of God. I'm sure that this news had to be disorienting, bewildering and a lot to process for anyone, let alone a small town teenager. After witnessing and hearing her older cousin's anointed message, Mary is so filled with love and joy that she gives all glory to God in the form of a song, reminiscent of Hannah's song from the Old Testament (1 Sam. 2:1-10). Mary's song, also called The Magnificat [Latin: magnifies] or the Canticle of Mary, is recorded here in the Gospel of Luke. Let us listen to the young Mary's joyous song of hope and justice in response to her cousin Elizabeth's blessing but more importantly, let us listen for God's Word for us this day. First though, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 1:46b-55.**

If You're Missing Baby Jesus, a true story that takes place during the Depression **by Jean Gietzen**, sat on my bookshelf for several years until

I finally read it. The story involves a young Jean, who recalls one very special Christmas with her family in 1943. Jean shares that her father worked for an oil company in North Dakota. The company moved him around to different parts of the state, and at some point between one move and another, Jean's family lost their nativity set. Jean and her brother, Tom, helped their mom, Ethel, purchase a new set for \$3.99 at the local five and dime. While they were unpacking it, they discovered two figures of Baby Jesus. Jean's mother was concerned that someone may be missing the baby Jesus from their nativity set and so she had Jean and her brother, Tom, run back to the store and tell the manager that they have an extra Jesus. They asked the manager to please post a sign on the remaining boxes that read, "If you're missing Baby Jesus, call 7162." All week long they waited for the call to come. Every time the phone rang, Jean's mother would say, "I'll bet that's about Jesus," but it never was. Jean's father, Ray, tried to explain that the figurine could be missing from another set in another town or city and that packing errors occur all the time. He suggested that they put the extra Jesus back in the box and forget about it. "Back in the box!" Jean wailed. "What a terrible thing to do to the Baby Jesus. And at Christmastime, too." "Surely someone will call," Jean's mother assured her. "We'll just keep them together in the manger until someone calls." When no call had arrived by 5:00 on Christmas Eve, Jean's mother insisted that her father "just run down to the store" to see if there were any sets left. "Run down to the store?" Jean's father thundered. "It's 15 degrees below zero out there!" Jean begged him to go and said she would and Tom would go with him. They bundled up in their winter gear and headed out to the

store. Her father reluctantly went and complained the entire way about how ridiculous this all was. Upon arriving at the store, they discovered by looking in the display window that the sets were all gone. "Hooray, hooray!", shouted Tom. "The mystery will be solved tonight. Someone will call!" Their father, who remained several steps behind them, turned on his heel and headed back home. Inside the house once more, they saw that the extra figurine had vanished from the set as well as their mom. She and the extra Baby Jesus were no where to be found. They got busy stringing lights on the tree and wrapping presents. Then the phone rang. Jean's father yelled for Jean to answer it. "Tell'm we found a home for Jesus." But the caller was Jean's mother. She gave Jean instructions for them to come to 205 Chestnut St. immediately bringing with them three blankets, a box of cookies and some milk. Jean delivered her mother's message to her father, who was groaning. "What has she gotten us into now?" He continued to grumble as they wrapped up the milk in the blankets so it wouldn't freeze and made their way to 205 Chestnut St.

Tom and Jean sang Christmas songs as they walked. Every now and then, they'd call to their dad, "Let's pretend we're looking for a place to stay, Dad, like Joseph and Mary." "Let's pretend we are in Bethlehem where it is probably 65 degrees in the shade right now," their father answered. They finally arrived, and the house was the darkest one on the block. One tiny light burned in the living room. Their mother greeted Jean and Tom at the door. Their father, trailing behind them, arms loaded with blankets and cookies and milk, said, "Would you mind

telling me what is going on, Ethel? We have just walked through below zero weather with the wind in our faces all the way..." "Never mind that now," Jean's mother quickly interrupted her husband. "There is no heat in this house and this young mother is so upset she doesn't know what to do. Her husband walked out on her and her poor five children, leaving them to spend a very bleak Christmas. I told her you could fix that oil furnace in a jiffy." Jean's mother quickly left the room and began to prepare the cookies and milk for the children. Jean and Tom huddled with the children in the blankets to try and warm them up and Ray went to look at the furnace. The mother who lived there said to Jean's mother, "I've been doin' washin' and ironin' for people and cleaning the five and dime. I saw your number every day there on those boxes on the counter. When the furnace went out, that number kept goin' through my mind: 7162. 7162. Me and the kids ain't got no beddin', no warm clothes. I got a few Christmas toys for them, but I got no money to fix that furnace." As Jean's mother sat down the cookies and the milk on the coffee table, Jean noticed the figure of Baby Jesus lying there in the center of the table. It was the only sign of the Christmas season in the house. The children stared wide-eyed with wonder at the cookies plate. One of the littlest ones woke up and upon seeing a room filled with strangers, he began to cry. Jean's mother swooped him up in her arms and began to sing, "This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring Him laud, the Babe, the son of Mary." She sang, oblivious to the child's cries. She sang and danced with the child until he settled down again. "You hear that, Chester?" the young mother said to another child. "That woman is singin' bout the Lord Jesus. He

ain't ever gonna walk out on us. Why, He sent these people to us just to fix our furnace. And blankets we got now, too. We'll be warm tonight." Jean's father, walked into the room, wiped his hands and said, "I've got the furnace going, but it'll need more oil. I'll make a few calls tonight when I get home and we'll get you some oil. Yessir, you came to the right place," he grinned. His demeanor completely had changed. No more complaining on the way home. As soon as Jean's father walked in the door, he got on the phone. "Ed, Hey, how are you? Yes, Merry Christmas to you, too. Say, Ed, we have kind of an unusual situation here..." And before Jean and Tom's eyes, their father had gathered an army to pick up a Christmas tree, bring oil and food to 205 Chestnut St. Jean and Tom ran into their rooms, grabbing clothes and toys from their closet. No one ever did call about the missing figurine in the Nativity set, but as Jean grew older, she realized that it wasn't a packing mistake at all.

Just as Jean's mother burst into an anthem of love, Mary joyfully magnifies God by singing an anthem of hope and justice for the world's poorest, most forgotten, most brokenhearted, most oppressed people (Debie Thomas). Mary uses past tense in her prophecy. It's almost as if Mary is calling the people to remember that this is who God is- this is what God's love looks like. Mary casts a vision of the kingdom of God here on earth. She paints a picture of a reordered and renewed world- "a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, only the Christ she carries in her womb can birth it into being. Isn't that a world worth singing about? Even if it costs us before it fulfills us (Thomas)? Afterall, "God took on humanity in bodily fashion. Out of love for human beings,

God becomes a human being. 'For God so loved the world...' It really is beyond all our understanding: the birth of a child shall bring about the great change, shall bring to all humankind salvation and deliverance" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is In the Manger*). "Mary was a prophet and deliverer. She birthed God's beauty into the world. Our search for a beautiful Advent ends with the promise of Earth renewed, all oppression and violence ceased" (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage eNewsletter*). This is the message God has placed in Mary's heart. In it, Mary calls us to join her in being agents of change...to be mini Christ bearers- bringing Christ's light and love into the world. Mary calls us to worship and follow Christ the Lord, the Savior of the world, Love with flesh on. The question is not where will we find the Child, for the Child is everywhere. The question is whether we will worship and follow the Child. Love came down at Christmas. Won't you be bearers of that Love? Lord, please give us a spirit of love and empathy! May it start with me. May it start with you. May it start with us "little Christs." It's the very thing the world needs about now. Amen.