

Every year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there is displayed, beneath the great Christmas tree, a beautiful eighteenth century nativity scene. In many ways it is a very familiar scene. The usual characters are all there: shepherds roused from sleep by the voices of angels; the exotic wise men from the East; Joseph; Mary; the babe -- all are there, each figure an artistic marvel of wood, clay, and paint. There is, however, something surprising about this scene, something unexpected here, easily missed by the casual observer. What is strange here is that the stable, and the shepherds, and the cradle are set, not in the expected small town of Bethlehem, but among the ruins of mighty Roman columns. The fragile manger is surrounded by broken and decaying remnants of a once might empire. The artists knew the meaning of this event: This apparently small, insignificant birth would change the world.

We might have imagined that God would start His great redemptive plan with a big bang, a loud crashing of cymbals, a “shock and awe” set of heavenly fireworks that would stun the earth into awareness, if not submission. The coming of Jesus Christ was no insignificant matter. It was the turning point of all human history, indeed, the fulcrum of all creation. Had Hollywood directors or political advisors been running the show, Advent would feel more like the media frenzy hyping up a Super Bowl or a carefully orchestrated public launch of a presidential contender. But God had a different plan altogether. For the coming of Christ, God favored whisper over shouts, subtlety over sensationalism. Just look how many ways God concealed the beginning of His greatest revelation in small packages!

First, the story begins with a small town. If you were planning a big announcement, wouldn't you put it on the grandest stage, where it could get the most exposure? Sure we would. But God begins this story of Jesus in a small country barely noticeable on the world stage, and in a tiny village in that country barely noticeable on the Israeli stage. Nazareth was not Jerusalem, much less Athens or Rome.

Because Jesus was born there, God was whispering that Jesus would relate to the common person, not just the elite or powerful. He would be raised around small town values, where everyone knew your name and your family, where the entire village helped raise you. I am guessing that many of you grew up in just such an environment.

The story focuses on a young maiden. What an unlikely character was Mary to play such a starring role in God's great mysterious plan of salvation! Mary would likely have been around 13 or 14 years old when the angel appeared to her. Can you imagine that? If you have a Middle School or Junior High girl in your family, then you know how improbable it is that it would be someone this young who would have to respond to the announcement that she was chosen for a role that would totally reshuffle all of her plans for life. At that age the greatest worries should be whether the acne will clear up in time for the Junior High dance, not whether the entire history of salvation would go forward based upon her acceptance of a difficult and uncertain calling.

Why didn't God choose a royal family for the birth of Jesus? At least he would be raised in a castle, surrounded by the best of medical care, the best of teachers, the lap of luxury. A royal child would have so many advantages starting off in life, right? For an example, just think of the young prince George, first-born son of Prince William and Kate Middleton, heir apparent to the throne of England. His every appearance is front-page news. Now that seems like the sort of child we would script for the Messiah, if we had been in charge of the Christmas story. What does it say, that the very Son of God would be raised in an ordinary home of the working man? Again, is God trying to whisper that Jesus has come to relate to everyman, at every place, in every circumstance? What is so remarkable about this story is how unremarkable the characters and setting seem to be.

The story begins with a small baby. I think people expected God to split open the heavens with the arrival of a conquering Messiah accompanied by a legion of angels? But instead God chose to come into the world just as every other human has come into the world since the birth of Adam and Eve's children, as a small baby. When you think about it, is there anything more defenseless, more vulnerable, than a newborn baby? Baby humans are born with less natural ability and autonomy than most other animals. Baby humans take years before they can survive on their own – and as some parents can witness to, some of them take decades. Babies are born unable to walk, unable to speak, with no teeth, and very poor eyesight. How much more vulnerable can we be? Jesus came to earth as a newborn baby—vulnerable, defenseless, small. But like an acorn that grows into a mighty oak, or the small inconspicuous Christmas package under the tree that conceals the diamond engagement ring, sometimes the smallest things have the greatest potential, given enough time and nurture.

And probably most important of all the story begins with a small word, “Yes.” Mary is presented with a daunting calling by the angel. Her world we be turned upside down, in order for our world to be turned right side up. She was chosen by God for this incredible moment. But after the angel's announcement, and after the prophecy and assurances that God would bless this child and give him the throne of David forever, and after the reassuring sign of the pregnancy of her kinswoman, Elizabeth, proving yet again that “nothing is impossible for God”—after all of this, the angel fell silent, and all heaven with him, waiting for the answer of a young teenage girl. What would she say? What if she says, “no”? And who could blame her? It was a lot to take in, this angel appearing with a message about a virgin birth, a baby conceived by the Holy Spirit, that her baby would be the Messiah, the Son of God. So here is the holy hush, while all eternity held its collective breath, waiting on the word of a young girl.

And then she said it, that one small word that put this whole grand Divine plan in motion. She said, "Yes."

People ask God for so many things. It is said that the world's most popular prayer is, "Thy will be changed." But the world's greatest prayer is, "Thy will be done." Mary prayed the latter and changed the world with one small word. What might be changed if you say, "yes" to the lord today?