

Here's a secret you may not know about me: there was a time in my life when I absolutely loved singing. Here's an even bigger secret: there was a time in my life when I thought I was a really great singer...seriously. If you've never heard me sing or heard stories about me singing, all you really need to know is I'm terrible. When Nina was three, I thought I would sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," to her and she said, "Daddy, can you stop singing? It makes my tummy hurt." In what had to be one of the greatest parenting feats of all time, my parents kept a straight face as they affirmed my singing ability as I belted out "This is My Father's World," with the highest pitched voice my eight year-old self could muster.

But, in all seriousness, I loved singing. Specifically, I loved singing the hymns I learned growing up in church. And one of my favorites that we sang in my rural North Alabama church was "Blessed Assurance," whose chorus goes like this: "This is my story, this is my song. Praising my Savior all the day long."

While I no longer believe I'm a good singer and whenever the question of music in church comes up, I say, "Matthew, Help!" I still love church music, even if my childhood favorites are no longer the ones I find most meaningful. As someone who thinks critically about theology, faith, scripture, and so forth, I've realized there are a lot of songs with a richer theological underpinning than "Blessed Assurance." For one, my faith doesn't give me a whole lot of assurance about what I believe. Instead, it invites me to lean into mystery. However, one thing I believe the hymn absolutely gets right is the imagery of faith as a story, faith as a song.

A few years ago, I heard NPR's Terry Gross interview singer and songwriter KT Tunstall. Inevitably, Gross asked her about her most famous song, "Black horse and the Cherry Tree." I wondered if she must be tired of being asked about that song. I wondered if she wanted to shout every time that question came up, "You know, I've written other songs." But I was so struck by what she said. While I don't remember the quote verbatim, she basically said, "You know that song has been played on the radio literally hundreds of times every day since it was released and I've had fans reach out to tell me how that song spoke to them, the meaning they found in it. And what I realized is that a lot of times, the meaning they found in the song was not even something I was thinking about when I wrote it. I had things I wanted to convey in that song, but it's almost like the song has taken on a life of its own and given people meaning in ways I never considered."

I realized that music was a two-way street. Music is not just the musician transposing meaning onto us who consume her art, but rather, we bring to that art our own emotions, life experiences, and uniqueness that takes that art and gives it different and new meanings. I realized that music, art, poetry, and story are not limited to a single, solitary meaning, but rather have this way of calling forth meaning out of us. That's why I love the imagery in "Blessed Assurance," of faith being a story and a song. If anything, that very imagery betrays the theme of assurance if, by assurance, we mean a single, knowable truth, and, instead, the imagery invites us not just believe the story, but to live the story.

Story is the reason I'm still a Christian. But I have to be honest. Sometimes, I forget that. As a person who likes to think about faith, I can end up expending way too much energy explaining away irrational parts of our faith story. It is Christmas week and we just heard what I believe to be our most beautiful story.

The angel Gabriel and the virgin Mary.

The Magi and the Star.

The shepherds and the chorus of angels.

Joseph and his dream.

And the Child of God being born as a baby and lain in a manger.

And yet, if I'm not careful, I let rationality get in the way of the beauty of this story. I've spent a lot of time thinking about and even some time teaching about whether Mary was really a virgin. Maybe the Magi saw Jupiter and Saturn aligned. Maybe the shepherds and angels were just Luke sprucing up the narrative. Maybe Joseph was simply being merciful to Mary. And maybe Jesus in the manger is merely symbolic of how God comes to us.

But more and more I've come to believe these exercises of trying to rationally explain this story is as silly as asking KT Tunstall for one single, solitary meaning of "The Black Horse and the Cherry Tree." It misses the point. Imagine if the characters in the Christmas story had responded in that way. What if Mary demanded a better explanation from Gabriel? What if Joseph divorced Mary because he knows there's only one way women become pregnant? What if the shepherds just kept watch over their flocks and the Magi never left Babylon because the story didn't make sense. In one way or another, each character in the story had to do something that didn't make a whole lot of sense.

Mary's part in the story is perhaps the hardest. All God was asking Mary to do was to be the mother of Jesus by becoming an unwed pregnant teenager, something that certainly would cause her to lose her fiancé and possibly cause her to lose her life. She would lose her position in society and be forever labeled as an adulterer. I don't know what was going through Mary's mind, but I am certain that what the angel was asking of her made absolutely no sense. I am certain that this was not part of Mary's plan for her life. I imagine she and Joseph had talked about what kind of life they would have together. But all of a sudden, those plans came crashing down.

But then the real miracle in the story happens. The real miracle is not that a virgin could become pregnant, but that Mary said "Yes." My guess is that after Mary said yes, things didn't all of a sudden become crystal clear. My guess is that Mary did not have all the details about how this was going to happen or how it was all going to work out. My guess is that the whole thing still did not make sense. But Mary didn't need for the story to make sense. She didn't

need all the details. She didn't need to understand everything. Instead, she chose to make this story her story. She trusted enough not only to believe the angel's story but to become a part of it – or maybe it was only by becoming a part of the story that she was able to believe it.

Our next character in the story is Joseph. Joseph's role was not as difficult as Mary's. He wasn't going to have to risk his life. But it was still hard. Mary was pregnant and Joseph knew the baby wasn't his. But God asks him to trust...trust Mary...and trust God. The angel comes to Joseph and tells him that, yes, Mary is still a virgin—that this child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Now, I don't know about you, but I have a hard time understanding that. I mean babies don't just drop out of thin air. But as hard as it is for me to understand it, I bet it was a hundred times harder for Joseph to understand it.

But then, just like Mary does, Joseph decides to go with the story. And again like Mary, my guess is that Joseph still did not understand how this had happened --- that he still did not understand how it had all worked out, but he too made this story, his story. Like Mary, Joseph trusted enough to become a part of the story – and by becoming a part of the story, by living the story, it became real.

And we could go on and on with example after example not just of characters in the Christmas story but throughout the New Testament of people who chose to make this story, their story. One of course is the apostle Paul and what strikes me so much about Paul is that he focuses not so much on trying to get people to believe every single detail of the Jesus story, but rather on what difference that has made in his own life and what difference that story has made and can make in other's lives.

He was the living embodiment of a life transformed, going from someone who persecuted the early church to one who was willing to suffer for it. He saw the Holy Spirit come upon the Gentiles and rather than trying to logically make sense of how that fit with what he previously knew about religion, he trusted that God's story was progressing as it should and he began to preach that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female. And in our passage today, he talked about how entering into this story leads us to live lives of kindness, compassion, and love.

But this story is not only Mary and Joseph's story. It's not only Paul and the other early Christians' story. It is not just a story that happened a long time ago. It's our story too. God invites us to allow this little baby whose birthday we celebrated this week to turn out lives upside down. Paul ends his litany by saying, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." In other words when we make the Jesus story, our story then it impacts everything else we do.

God invites us to let this little baby completely change the way we see the world and ourselves. God invites us to be a part of this story that is saving the world and overcoming all of our problems in the most unlikely of ways – by the birth of a baby. This story doesn't make a whole lot of rational sense. It doesn't make sense that God's solution to war, to violence, to hate, to

greed, to hopelessness is the birth of a baby. Like the characters in the first Christmas story discovered, this story only make sense when it becomes our story. We aren't able to "believe" this story by explaining away the mysteries. Rather, we "believe" this story when we choose it for our story. We "believe" this story by living this story.

But one final thing. The Christmas story is not only about humans becoming part of God's story. It is also about God becoming part of our story. This is the story not only of God inviting us to have our lives turned upside down by the birth of this baby, but also the story of God taking on all of our pain, all of our suffering, all of the violence and war and hatred of the world and overcoming them using nothing but love. And maybe that's why we dare to believe this story – that here at Christmas we celebrate that God is not a distant God looking down on us from above; but that God has entered into our stories right here alongside us.

So, this is my story, and this is my song and that will remain true whether I ever have any assurance or not.