

**DONNA VANLIERE**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE CHRISTMAS SHOES*

*Looking*  
**FOR**  
*Christmas*

A SEARCH FOR THE  
**JOY AND HOPE**  
OF THE NATIVITY

# *Looking* **FOR** *Christmas*

DONNA VANLIERE



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS  
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover design by Faceout Studio, Addie Lutz

Cover images created by Addie Lutz / Faceout Studio


Interior design by Janelle Coury

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## LOOKING FOR CHRISTMAS

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

[www.harvesthousepublishers.com](http://www.harvesthousepublishers.com)

ISBN 978-0-7369-9211-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-7369-9212-1 (eBook)

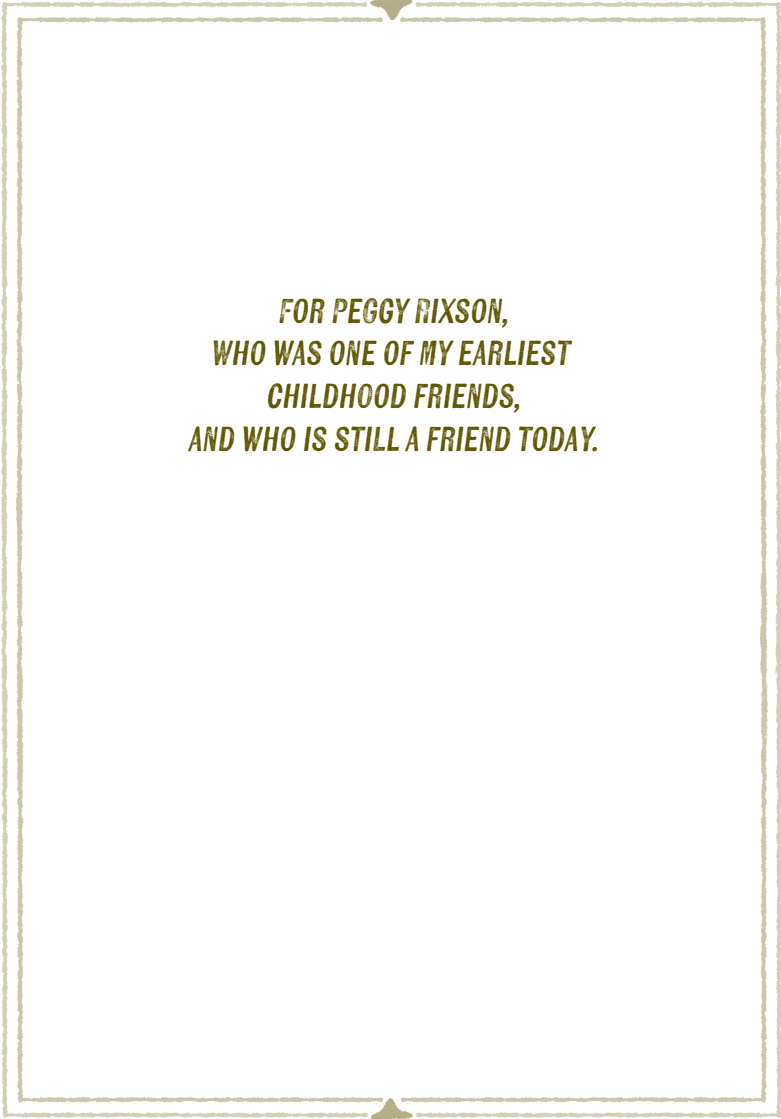
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024951616

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**Printed in China**

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 / DC / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*FOR PEGGY RIXSON,  
WHO WAS ONE OF MY EARLIEST  
CHILDHOOD FRIENDS,  
AND WHO IS STILL A FRIEND TODAY.*



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## *The Charlie Brown in All of Us*

You remember the scene from the 1965 television special *A Charlie Brown Christmas*: Charlie Brown is confiding in his pal Linus on a bright, wintry day but something is amiss. Charlie Brown tells his friend that something must be wrong with him because even though Christmas is coming, he's just not happy. He's not feeling the way he's "supposed to feel." He chalks it up that he simply doesn't understand Christmas. Sure, he likes getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees, but he's still not happy. As a matter of fact, he feels downright depressed.

Apparently, Charlie Brown had been watching too many Christmas commercials and movies, where idyllic decorations brighten every corner of a home and attractive, good-natured family members laugh easily with one another while pajama-clad children chatter like Santa's elves over board games and puzzles in front of a

large, roaring fire. In our imaginations, we envision our friends and coworkers with a beautiful tree, a delicious meal, and shiny, happy faces, enjoying it all. Christmas is, after all, for two-car, two-career families in towns called Pleasantville. Somehow we, along with Charlie Brown, have been sold a bill of goods saying that's what Christmas is all about.

Where did it all go south, and how did we get it so wrong? While picture-perfect, happy people enjoy the presents and the feast of Christmas, that's not how it all began. Jesus was not born in a mansion or castle or surrounded by nobility. He was born to a simple peasant woman and her carpenter husband so that He could sympathize with our brokenness, heartache, pain, and disappointments. The first people who took the time to find Him were not kings or queens or celebrities of any kind. They were shepherds who were working the night shift.

"Do not be afraid," the angel said to them. "I bring you good news of great joy." Perhaps the shepherds were thinking weekends off with pay, but the angel went on. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

A Savior has come for the girl who left home at 16 and for the father who drove her away. A Rescuer has come for every child who has been abandoned by a

parent. A Healer has come to bind up the wounds of the one who can't escape the trauma of childhood. A Redeemer has come for every man or woman whose train wreck of a life careened off the rails years ago. They're among the ones Christmas is for!

Christmas is for the lonely and the brokenhearted. It's for the widow or the family with an empty chair around their table. It's for the single mom who works two jobs to feed her kids. It's for the young woman who works in strip clubs and the mother at home who worries about her. Christmas is for the homeless man who waits for the doors of the rescue mission to open for a hot meal and for the lonely millionaire tucked away behind the moat that is his front yard.

Christmas is for everyone who keeps looking for love in all the wrong places and hoping deep in their hearts that the hope of the Nativity really does exist. Christmas is for those who have lost everything: their job, their fortune, their good name, their family, or their dreams. Christmas is for those who punch a time clock and have swollen feet. It's for those who ride a train an hour and a half each way for work and for those who sell beauty and glamour when they themselves feel ugly and lost.

Christ came down from heaven to heal broken marriages and mend fractured families. He came for those who drink too much, smoke like chimneys, inhale from

a crack pipe, sell their bodies, or are addicted to online shopping, power, status, cosmetic procedures, work, exercise, money, or food. He came for those who find their happiness in a pill bottle, for those who gamble away everything, and for those who hide a burner phone from their spouse. He came for the depressed, the lonely, the anxious, the stressed, the hopeless, and the discouraged.

That dark, smelly Nativity scene filled with the stink and noise of animals is not a place to look down on or be pitied, but rather, it was the beginning of hope for us all. Grace was born there. Peace penetrated our hopelessness there. Love shone bright in our darkness there. That is our comfort and joy.

Like Charlie Brown, if Christmas has got you down, if you can't find Christ in Christmas, if you're feeling that your life somehow doesn't measure up to the hype, then the truth of the Nativity is for you!

Like the shepherds, let's go to Bethlehem and look for the manger. Let's explore why the birth of Jesus in that stable more than 2,000 years ago is the dividing point of history. Like Mary, let's treasure all these things, pondering them in our hearts. And like the magi, let's go on a journey to worship the King of kings!





## ONE

### *Looking at Mary*

I AM THE LORD'S SERVANT. MAY EVERYTHING YOU  
HAVE SAID ABOUT ME COME TRUE (LUKE 1:38).

*Joseph's stomach rumbles as he packs the donkey. He should have eaten more but is anxious to get on the road. His eyes meet Mary's as he helps her onto the donkey. He nods and she smiles in the half-light. Joseph walks beside the donkey, and although he does not look at them, he feels the eyes of his neighbors as they pass. The chattering of three women drawing water ceases as he and Mary go by, and Mary keeps her head down. She has long known what they think of her. The laughter of two men mending a fishing net subsides to a whisper as the donkey approaches, and children stop playing in the street when their mothers clack their tongues and snap their fingers.*

*Joseph sets his jaw and ignores them, relieved to get away for a while. Angels of God had visited him and Mary about this baby, but they hadn't visited everyone in town. Joseph has heard the townspeople ridicule Mary. He has seen them point and then turn away, ostracizing her with*

*their clenched teeth and cold shoulders. "Perversion," they have said. "Prostituted under the nose of her father." The gossiped indictments and whispered innuendoes have seeped under every doorway. The conception was not cloaked in anonymity. Everyone knew her name. They knew her father and mother's names. Joseph's own heart has throbbed with a dull pain for weeks, and looking at Mary, he wonders how someone so young is able to bear the burden of such a stigma.*

*Mary lays her hands on her swollen belly. The baby dropped into the birth canal days ago, causing increasing discomfort. A chill clings to the shadows that stretch over the sleepy town, and Joseph places a thin blanket over Mary's legs. The morning echoes grow distant as they thread their way out of town, and Joseph's tensions ease.*

*"Are you well?" he asks.*

*"I am," she says, smiling, rubbing her stomach. "He is no longer stirring but is heavy inside."<sup>1</sup>*

I wrote that years ago for a book called *The Christmas Journey* to illustrate what Joseph and Mary might have endured when the townspeople of the sleepy village of Nazareth learned that she was pregnant before marriage. The Bible says that Mary was "confused and disturbed" by what the angel Gabriel had said to her (Luke 1:29). Gabriel saw her reaction and told her not to be afraid

because she had found favor with God. The thoughts that must have been swirling in her mind! She was not royalty; she was unknown, a nobody and nothing special. Her family was part and parcel of the peasant people in Nazareth, a completely undistinguished town. In this little backwater hamlet, how in the world had she found favor with God?

Gabriel wasn't finished. He went on, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" (verses 31-33).

At this point, Mary must have been trying to catch her breath, her thoughts spinning. She, little Mary from Nazareth, would give birth to a son who would sit on the throne of David? He would reign over Israel forever? His kingdom would never end? Kings didn't come from Nazareth! And that was just the smallest bit of the confusion she felt.

Mary found her voice. Mystified and bewildered, she asked, "How can this happen? I am a virgin" (verse 34).

Gabriel explained how it would happen, and we can only imagine what it must have been like from his perspective to see her face! "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will

overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail" (verses 35-37).

She, a virgin, would carry the Son of God. But the miracles did not stop there. Her cousin Elizabeth, who was very old, would also give birth to a son! After centuries of silence, during which God had not spoken through His prophets or an angel of the Lord, God's own Son would be stepping down into their world to be with them. God would no longer be silent! This would be too much for anyone to process, let alone a young teenager about to be married. Surely, Mary's heart was thumping inside her chest. But instead of being scared and focused on herself, Mary put her trust in the Lord and said, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true. And then the angel left her" (verse 38).

Mary knew that being pregnant without being married meant she could be stoned to death. She knew it meant she would be the buzz of gossip in her little village. She knew that she would live with scorn and rejection from those around her. At that point, she did not know the joy and sorrow that the baby forming inside

her would bring to her. She did not know that she would not die in obscurity like the other women in her village, but that she would be honored for centuries to come. She did not know that she would carry the child who would make each of us a child of God.

Mary couldn't comprehend that she would feed bread to the Bread of Life or help the One dress who would robe her in righteousness. She could not foresee that the tiny hands that would wrap around her fingers as He learned to walk would open the eyes of the blind and heal the diseased and one day be nailed to a Roman cross. She couldn't grasp that within her womb a little mouth would form that had spoken the world into existence and would grow up to speak the very Word of God. She couldn't fathom the baby's feet that would kick from inside her womb would someday walk up Calvary's hill to His own execution.

She couldn't see what was ahead and didn't have all the answers. But she said yes to God anyway.

## **GOD'S FAVOR**

Gabriel called Mary "favored woman" (Luke 1:28), and the biblical meaning is that she was imbued with special honor. Of all the women on the earth, she was given the privilege of carrying God's Son (and she would receive Him as her Savior, just like all others who

believe), but Gabriel didn't say she was perfect or sinless. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 NKJV). "All" in that verse means all. It doesn't exclude anyone. Mary was a sinner, just like you and I are sinners, but God had chosen her. The Bible doesn't say why she was chosen except that she was a virgin; the other reasons are known only by God alone. But we do know these things about Mary from Scripture:

- ✦ We know that she was a woman of faith because she believed the Lord would do what He said.
- ✦ We know she praised the Lord and magnified His name.
- ✦ We know she was in awe of the Lord and recognized His mercies.
- ✦ We know she recognized God's power to scatter the proud and lift up the humble.
- ✦ We know she was hungry for the good things of God.
- ✦ We know she felt God's love and mercy for Israel because she knew that God keeps His promises.

- ✦ We know she knew God's Word because nearly all the words from her prayer in Luke 1:46-55 are from Scripture.
- ✦ And we know she was obedient because she put her yes on the table when she said to Gabriel, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true" (Luke 1:38).

For a common and ordinary girl living in a plain, ordinary village where nothing ever changed, the birth of God's Son would ricochet around the world, and nothing would ever be the same again.

## MARY'S RESPONSE

✦ The angel Gabriel told Mary that she was pregnant, but humanly speaking, that was impossible—she was a virgin. Gabriel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). God's answer to Mary's confusion was the Holy Spirit. His answer to the impossible in her life was the Holy Spirit. What God was about to accomplish could not be done by human means, but only by divine power. And when we ask Jesus to be Lord and Savior of our lives, the Holy Spirit takes up residence inside us so that He can give us the

power and strength needed for each impossible circumstance in our lives. “‘You will not succeed by your own strength or by your own power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD All-Powerful” (Zechariah 4:6 NCV). It is the Holy Spirit’s power that guides and leads us through dark valleys and deep waters.

✦ The next words out of Mary’s mouth didn’t begin with “but.” She didn’t say, “But I’ll be shunned because I’ll be pregnant and unmarried,” or “But this will bring shame on my family.” She responded in submission by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true” (Luke 1:38). She wasn’t delusional or denying her circumstances. She was simply aligning her words with God’s promise. Words matter. We use them every day in conversations, emails, texts, letters, or social media posts. It’s our choice how we use them. “The tongue can bring death or life” (Proverbs 18:21). Mary could have used her words to argue and put up a fight, but that would have brought turmoil and difficulty into the situation. She chose to use her words to confirm that she believed God’s word and was stepping out in faith.

✦ Mary then did a wise thing. The Bible doesn’t tell us if it was her idea or if she was encouraged by her

parents, but she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also supernaturally pregnant. Mary chose to spend time with her elderly cousin, who, by biology alone, should not have been pregnant...but God! For three months, Mary surrounded herself with people who also believed God's word in impossible circumstances. Who we choose to be with impacts our faith and life choices. Mary was with people who believed God's promises despite what reality looked like and she was in a home where her faith would grow. If we want to experience abiding joy and peace, we need to surround ourselves with those who will help our faith in Jesus to grow, and cause our trust in God's Word to become deeper.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby within her jumped for joy and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. As he was being formed in his mother's womb, Elizabeth's unborn child was the first to recognize and respond to Jesus. And at the very moment that her baby jumped, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit! She said to Mary, "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said" (Luke 1:45). Mary hadn't told Elizabeth she was pregnant. She hadn't said anything beyond a greeting—it was the Holy Spirit within Elizabeth who revealed this information to her. After that, Mary couldn't help but begin praising the Lord.

Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.  
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!  
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,  
and from now on all generations will  
call me blessed.  
For the Mighty One is holy,  
and he has done great things for me  
(verses 46-49).

✦ Mary was praising and giving God the glory even before the promised birth of Jesus! She had no comprehension of the heartache, difficulties, or challenges that were ahead, but that wasn't her focus. Her song of praise was about God's faithfulness, His mercies, and His fulfilled promises. We can't linger on the "What ifs...?" in our present situation or future circumstances. Like Mary, we must focus on God's faithfulness, His goodness, His kindness, His grace, His mercies, and His fulfilled promises to us. When we do that, we can't help but praise the Lord!

Mary was favored by God. Throughout her life, she may have questioned why she was chosen and most certainly would have remembered words from the Scriptures, particularly the prophet Isaiah, who said, "The Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')"(Isaiah

7:14). Quickly thereafter, Mary would have recalled the angel Gabriel's words to her: "The word of God will never fail" (Luke 1:37). Indeed, God's word had never failed.

Mary honored her word and provided a loving home for God's only Son. She laughed and cried as she raised Jesus through His childhood and stood weeping in anguish as Romans raised Him up on a cross. She was the only one who had been present with Jesus from the cradle to the cross. And through everything, the Lord was with her. Just as He is with you.