

Mary Had a Choice and She Chose Life

When the mighty angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with a prophetic announcement that she would give birth to a baby named Jesus, fearful thoughts surely flooded her young soul. Under Jewish law, single women who turned up pregnant were stoned to death in the public square. At best, she would be an outcast, divorced and unmarriageable before she ever even wedded Joseph.

If anyone can relate to the fears of women who face unexpected pregnancies, it's Mary. Every day, 3,322 women give in to that fear and choose to have an abortion, according to the Guttmacher Institute—and a disturbing 64 percent of them are Protestants and Catholics. Mary chose to obey the law of God—understanding all too well that abortion is a violation of the Sixth Commandment: “Thou shall not kill.” She loved not her life even unto death and bore a Son who gave eternal life to dying souls.

But what if Mary wasn't pro-life? What if she chose, instead, to give in to the fear, the social stigma, the financial pressures or one of the many other reasons women choose to have abortions? What if she had decided not to respond to Gabriel's declaration with, “I am the servant of the Lord. May it be unto me according to your Word” (Luke 1:28)? Mary had a choice—and she chose life. She chose to give birth to the Son of God who would take away the sin of the world.

Fast-forward 2,000 years and many frightened, pregnant women are facing the same choice today. They can listen to the spirit of abortion whispering in their ear about the convenience of murder, the cost of raising a child, the struggles of being a single mother, the call to lay down their own dreams to nurture the dreams of another—or they can listen

to that still, small voice urging them to choose life.

“It happened in biblical times,” says Laura Allred, director of the Back to Life Movement. “That spirit of abortion—now legalized in many nations across the earth—was alive and well then. If Mary hadn’t yielded to the Spirit of God and pressed into the strength of the Lord, ... can you imagine? What a brave, brave woman it took! I’m thankful that Mary chose life and gave us the Savior of the world.”

As millions celebrate the birth of Jesus this Christmas, many pro-life advocates are asking these profound questions: What if Jesus had never been born? What if Mary hadn’t been pro-life? What if the manger had been empty?

Changing One Heart at a Time

Mary had a heart after God’s will, but many women who have abortions don’t know Jesus. Changing a culture of death that sees over 1 million abortions in America, then, means more than changing laws—it means changing hearts with Holy Spirit strategies that demonstrate the selfless love of God in a selfish world. That’s the goal of a growing nationwide movement known as “Empty Manger.”

Hundreds of people will gather again this Christmas around empty mangers outside abortion clinics and sing Christmas carols that aim to stir hope and joy in places of misery and despair. Countless lives have been saved as mothers—touched by songs such as “Silent Night”—have reconsidered the choice to abort their babies.

“It puts Christmas into the proper perspective,” says Eric Scheidler, executive director of the Pro-Life Action League, which held the first Empty Manger event in 2003 in Chicago. “It shows you in a very powerful way how desperately the world needs Christ. It puts you in touch with what the world was like before Christ came and radically redirected human history, establishing the church and putting down the worship

of demons that had been so prevalent.”

Holy Spirit-inspired pro-life strategies are not returning void. Indeed, they are accomplishing what God intends them to do one life at a time.

The Personhood USA movement contends to drive personhood rights for all humans, and March for Life recently saw 300,000 protest abortion at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Back to Life Movement enlisted 39 young women to walk nearly 250 miles from Houston to Dallas, and then there’s Bound4LIFE, a grass-roots prayer mobilization movement focused on the ending of abortion. The number of adoptions has increased, while spiritual awakening has brought about a reformation of government and society. Hearts and minds are changing even as the culture wars rage.

Call it a massive shift in public opinion about abortion. “Over the last two years, there has been a wave of the most pro-life legislation we’ve ever seen combined with some of the most revealing evidence exposing the abortion industry,” says Matt Lockett, executive director of Bound4Life.

Since the 2010 elections, some 260 pro-life laws have been passed across the country, according to Americans United for Life. Already, a dozen states have passed the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act—prohibiting abortions of unborn children who can feel pain. The National Right to Life Committee reports substantial medical evidence that demonstrates unborn children are capable of experiencing pain by 20 weeks after fertilization.

This death-defying legislation comes amid the release of a series of undercover videos revealing what attorneys for The Center for Medical Progress (CMP) describe in court documents as Planned Parenthood’s alleged “practice of buying and selling fetal issue.” In the wake of the scandal that brought disgusting abortion practices to light, Planned Parenthood’s

“favorability” has dropped from 55 percent in 2012 to 44 percent now while its “unfavorability” has increased from 22 percent to 39 percent, according to the Alliance Defending Freedom.

“Abraham Lincoln said if you can change public opinion that you can change government,” Lockett says. “What we are seeing in conjunction with public opinion changing is more and more legislation. We are seeing it at the state level and amazing attempts at the federal level. States have been pulling funding for Planned Parenthood.”

Spotlight on Planned Parenthood

The Planned Parenthood controversy erupted when a series of undercover videos revealed the abortion giant allegedly receives money from medical research companies in exchange for “donating” body parts of the babies it aborts.

Posing as the head of a company eager to purchase fetal body parts and tissue, David Daleiden, executive director of CMP, and others caught Planned Parenthood officials on video describing how they obtained tissue from aborted fetuses for researchers.

In court documents, attorneys for Daleiden explained the investigation revealed evidence of the “selling of fetal tissue for profit ... , the collection of intact fetuses born with beating hearts for research purposes and the procurement of fetal tissue for research without patient’s knowledge and consent.”

Planned Parenthood contends the videos falsely portray its participation in tissue donation programs for medical research. Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards says the organization does not sell the tissues and only accepted reimbursement for handling it. In the face of public outcry, she announced that a handful of health centers involved in fetal tissue research would no longer accept reimbursement.

But few are buying her story, including pro-life politicians.

The CMP videos prompted demands by members of Congress to cut off funding to Planned Parenthood, threatening a government shutdown in September. In October, the House of Representatives voted to create a select panel within the Energy and Commerce Committee to investigate abortion practices and how fetal tissues are handled and obtained, along with the costs.

“This is about getting answers to questions about how we treat and protect life in this country,” says pro-life Rep. Marsha Blackburn, vice chair of the committee. “This is a discussion that this country must have; we cannot shy away from what is an unsettling topic. The allegations raised in these disturbing and abhorrent videos have led us to ask: What have we come to in this country?”

Turning the Tide

The answer is clear: We’ve come to a culture of death where abortion is celebrated and euthanasia is being legislated. Although *Roe v. Wade* opened the floodgates to the spirit of abortion, that spirit was murdering preborn babies before the law, and no law can completely prevent the rising wave of lawlessness that Paul the apostle prophesied. Again, the answer is changing hearts. Many are leaving the abortion industry and sharing their testimonies with the world.

“In the midst of the rising tide of hostility that pro-life activists are experiencing, it’s important to remember that some of the most vociferous abortion advocates of the past have become prominent pro-life champions,” says Michael L. Brown, host of the nationally syndicated talk radio show “The Line of Fire” and president of the FIRE School of Ministry. “It’s a scenario that is sure to repeat itself again.”

Brown points to Dr. Bernard Nathanson, an obstetrician who oversaw the performance of about 75,000 abortions before

becoming a leading pro-life advocate. He performed his last abortion in 1979 and produced the 1985 film *The Silent Scream*, which shows sonogram images of a child in the womb trying to get away from the abortionist's death devices. He later produced *Eclipse of Reason*, which explains abortion procedures in gory detail.

Then there's Norma McCorvey, the "Jane Roe" of *Roe v. Wade* infamy. For those who still don't know the story, the 1973 ruling was based on a nonexistent case, as McCorvey never had an abortion. Brown notes that she too had a change of heart and a conversion to the Christian faith, and today she is a pro-life champion.

"Back in 1973, I was a very confused 21-year-old with one child and facing an unplanned pregnancy," she says in a one-minute pro-life video. "At the time I fought to obtain a legal abortion, but truth be told, I have three daughters and never had an abortion. ... I think it's safe to say that the entire abortion industry is based on a lie. ... I am dedicated to spending the rest of my life undoing the law that bears my name."

These are two prominent examples, but the stories of a countless number of less prominent "converts" are little known. Brown asks a hopeful question: If God could change the heart of Nathanson, a man who helped found National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) Pro-Choice America and once operated one of the nation's largest abortion clinics, and if God could change the heart of the "Roe" in *Roe v. Wade*, why couldn't He change the heart of the angry young woman who identified herself as a "fetus slayer"?

Exposing Abortion's Lies

In the never-ending abortion argument, there's no limit to the number of factions—pro-choice, pro-life, political parties, presidential candidates, bioethicists, legal and religious

scholars—clamoring for media attention to trumpet their particular point of view. So says Debby Efurd, president and co-founder of Dallas-based Initiative 180 and its post-abortion healing and recovery program, Peace After the Storm.

The problem is, she says, we rarely hear from those at the heart of the debate: the millions of “silent sufferers” for whom abortion has been a traumatic, life-changing experience. She’s lending her voice on behalf of the post-abortive community, which, by anyone’s calculation, is a large percentage of our society. Her message is loud and clear: Planned Parenthood has betrayed women.

“In 1973, I wasn’t informed of the medical procedure I would undergo; I never received counseling or even a follow-up phone call,” Efurd says. “I walked in the front door, paid for the services in cash and was then shown the back door—but not until the abortionist told me, ‘Good news: You no longer have a baby.’”

Efurd hopes a full investigation of the nation’s largest abortion provider will expose the extent of this deception—and that perhaps the physical, mental and emotional needs of women who are at their most vulnerable moments will finally be put first.

“For decades now, American women have been told they could have an abortion with little or no consequence,” Efrud says. “Nothing could be further from the truth. Abortion is an unnatural process that interrupts one of the primary functions of the human body.

“A woman’s body naturally resists the abortion, causing physical and emotional pain. I’m not alone in this mindset—there are millions just like me, women who regret their abortions and have suffered silently. For far too long, they have held on to a secret that slowly destroys them. But we are finding our voices with each passing day.”

As she sees it, the veil of lies has finally been lifted: Laws have been broken, human rights violated and we have all been deceived—and there's no way to "spin" this. She agrees with former Obama White House staffer Michael Wear, who said, "It should bother us as a society that we have use for aborted human organs, but not the baby (who) provides them."

Are There Any Exceptions?

Still, people like Efrud, Lockett, Allred and others who speak up for the preborn are often accused of being uncaring and disregarding the extenuating circumstances that might force a mother to choose death over life. What about rape? What about incest? What about an in-utero diagnosis of birth defects like Down Syndrome or Trisomy 18? Is abortion still murder then?

When Lisa Smiley was 23, she got pregnant with her firstborn. She was thrilled, until doctors spotted a life-threatening heart defect called Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome. Only half of the baby's heart was developed. Doctors suggested an abortion.

"We were stunned," Smiley says. "While I was crying and devastated to hear this, they took my husband to another room and explained to him the gravity of our decision. We had already told them we are against abortion, no matter how serious our son's condition was, yet they were not satisfied and thought we were being idealistic."

Smiley admits that she had absolutely no idea what she and her husband, Jim, were getting into. She knew they were not prepared for the challenges ahead. But long ago they had made a decision that abortion was wrong, under any condition. The Smileys chose life. When baby Ezekiel was born, he was put on life support. He had his first open-heart surgery at 1 week old, his second at 1 year old and his third at age 5.

When Ezekiel went into cardiac arrest in 2014 and died, Jim performed CPR while waiting for the paramedics, who revived

Ezekiel. He was left with a brain injury and was completely paralyzed and mute. Doctors said he was in a vegetative state and would eventually die, suggesting they cut off all life support.

Once again, the Smileys would have to live out their pro-life convictions when presented with the option to passively euthanize their son. With intense daily therapy for the past year and a half—along with vital prayer and encouragement—miraculously Ezekiel is learning to eat, walk and talk again.

“Thinking back, I am reminded of the option we had before Zeke was born to abort him—the warnings doctors gave us about all the complications that could happen, and did happen. Many may wonder, would I choose differently?” she asks. “Raising him has, no doubt, been hard, heart-wrenching and stretched us beyond anything we have done. Just as surely, our lives have been filled with joy and happiness by having Zeke in our family.”

Still, some women choose to abort, only to regret it later. About one in four women in America have had an abortion. For women who have had abortions, Allred says the Lord offers forgiveness, not condemnation.

“Some of the strongest voices for life are women who are post-abortive,” Allred says. “As I’ve ministered on this topic, women come up to me with tears streaming down their faces—some in their 70s—who have been carrying this and have never told another person, not even their spouses, that they had an abortion as a young woman.

“There are thousands and thousands of women in the church pews who are wounded, who have never confessed it and never gave themselves permission to grieve. I would say to them that there is no condemnation, and God will use even the darkest night of your soul for His glory.”

Hope for Life

This Christmas season, pro-life advocates have never been more hopeful about a sea change in the abortion industry. For Frank Pavone, national director for Priests for Life, the Planned Parenthood controversy has helped “expose abortion for what it is—a destructive reality in our society.” Given heightened public awareness about the real nature of abortion, Pavone says he’s more optimistic than ever that the number of abortions can be slashed: “Right now, we’re at a crossroads, and either enough people across the country are really going to wake up and do something about it, including things like the protests we’re seeing across the country or not.”

The big question is whether *Roe v. Wade* can ever be overturned. Pro-life advocates say this can’t occur until the composition of the U.S. Supreme Court is changed by presidential appointment.

Cheryl Sullenger, senior vice president at Operation Rescue, says she is encouraged that many of the candidates running for president are addressing abortion. “We have never been able to communicate on a national stage to the extent that these videos have allowed,” Sullenger says. “We have never seen presidential politics focused on abortion to the extent they are right now.”

Lockett believes abortion has a divine deadline. On the 40th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, following a 21-day fast and persistent prayer, he felt the Lord declaring He has a timetable for *Roe v. Wade*. Lockett says the Holy Spirit showed him how “dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 11:1) and that the U.S. has been using deceptive and dishonest weights in its scales so that it cannot accurately weigh the value of human life. “I’m absolutely convinced that *Roe v. Wade*’s days are numbered,” Lockett says. “While public opinion is changing, there are court cases that are moving through the system, and some of them will be hitting the

Supreme Court. That's ultimately where it has to go, and that's where we have to focus our prayers and our activism to continue to see the culture shift and to see the courts reflect that."

Lockett is praying on many different levels and suggests others do the same.

"I pray for the young girl who is in the most difficult situation of her life," Lockett says. "I'm praying that she would encounter the Lord and have the support from the church that she needs. I'm praying for elections, and I'm praying for the minds of judges who directly have the power and ability to change the laws of the land."

This Christmas, as people attend pro-life events and gather around empty mangers outside abortion clinics, the clock ticks toward this divine deadline.

"Abortion will continue to diminish over the next 10 years, and then with lower abortion numbers, we'll see more abortion clinics closing because they won't be able to stay in business because there is not enough money to go around," Sullenger declares. "I think that will happen before *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. You have to have all the stars align."

But that's what happened 2,000 years ago after Mary chose life and Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Wise men came from the east to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is He who was born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him" (Matt. 2:1-2).

This Christmas, let's do more than remember Jesus is the reason for the season. Let's do more than sing Christmas carols. Let's be thankful for Mary's courage and pray that women making decisions about unexpected pregnancies will choose life. After all, they may not be carrying the Son of God, but they could be carrying a world changer and a history maker.

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Watch Pro-Life Action League's seventh annual "Empty Manger" Christmas Caroling at five Chicago abortion mills at .