

[PRAYER] [BLANK] Once upon a time. It's the beginning of many of our favorite stories from childhood. Once upon a time, there was a princess, a prince, a knight, a frog, a bear...a child. Once upon a time, there was a story that made us excited to hear it, no matter how many times we'd heard it before. Once upon a time, you may have told that story again and again to a small child, to the point where you knew the story better than the child sitting on your lap, or tucked into bed. Our son doesn't remember the "Once upon a time" stories that we would read to him every night, but we remember them. Once upon a time, we loved to tell "Once upon a time" stories, hoping that the time for them would never end.

But then, we grow older, and our children grow older. We tuck away the board books in the attic, or give them to a new generation of children. "Once upon a time" stories give way to more grown-up stories, ones that don't always end happily ever after, ones where we struggle to find a way to tell them to ourselves, much less to our children.

Yet there is one "Once upon a time" story that never leaves us. We come back to this story again and again, no matter how young we are, no matter how old, no matter how far away from being young or old we may feel we are. It the beginning of the most amazing story of all time, the story of how God became flesh in the form of a baby boy, cradled in the arms of his poor and amazed mother, watched over by a father who tried to understand what his role was in the story. Billions of people have heard and told this story for two thousand years, and yet it remains fresh every year at Christmas, because we need it to be fresh. We need Christmas to be not just real, but the beginning of the best story of all time.

And it is the best story of all time, not because it is real, even though it is the most real story of all time, but because the way that we tell the story never stops to make sense in a world that continues to lose its senses. There was just one time - just once, upon a time - when God came into our imperfect world in the most imperfect of circumstances to be both God and human perfectly.

Once, just once, upon a time, God, the creator of all things, came into a mother through the Holy Spirit to be a creation, the baby Jesus - how, we really don't know, and like all the best stories, we don't really have to know the "how," we don't have to apologize for it to disbelievers, we just have to know that it made sense of a senseless world. If God, without sin, were to come into a sinful world perfectly for our sake, how could it be any other way? The story of Jesus starts as only a God who loved us perfectly could start it. That's all we really need to know.

Once, upon a time, there was a mother Mary who was told, by God's angel Gabriel, the amazing news of her baby's coming, realizing what a complete scandal it would make of her life, what a complete embarrassment it would be to her betrothed husband Joseph, what a complete shambles it would look like to her family and friends. Yet this young woman, confronted with the most challenging news that a young woman could face, realized that there was something more to this news than her own story.

What Mary realized is that her own body would be the beginning of God's

greatest story of all, the promised coming of salvation from God in Emmanuel, the Hebrew word for “God is with us.” She could have said, “No, I want my own story,” she could have said, “Yes, but can’t you make things better for me first?” She could have said a thousand different things, and I am sure that she felt a thousand different things, but the gospel of Luke tells us that there is just one thing that she said: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Offered the birth of God’s perfection on earth, Mary, a young woman, wanted nothing but God’s perfect and precious love to come into her perfectly, as the start of God’s perfection on earth, no matter what it meant for her.

Once, upon a time, a young woman pondered in her heart what all of these things meant, as the baby grew inside of her, just like any other baby, and yet unlike any other baby before or since. I remember the day that I drove June-Ann to the hospital when our son was born, with more emotions than I could imagine flowing through us. There was hope, there was love, there was joy, and, finally, there was the peace of a newborn baby boy, resting quietly on his mother, cradled by his father. As I went home to get some things, I looked up at the bright blue sky, and said just one thing to the perfect God of love: “Thank you.”

But Mary said the biggest “Thank you” of all time for her baby before Jesus was even born. Whatever hope there was for her, she knew that God had just offered her a part in the story of the greatest hope of all time. Whatever love there was for her, she knew that God’s amazing, overwhelming love for her and for the world was coming to pass in the flesh as never before. Whatever joy she could possibly have in her life, it would be nothing compared to the joy of the fulfillment of God’s promises of salvation through Israel. Whatever peace she could have kept for herself by rejecting God coming into the world, would be nothing compared to the peace that she would find in obeying the God of perfect love, when God needed her to say, “Thank you,” and just “Thank you.” In the middle of all of the personal failures that she might face in the face of God’s victory, through her perfect obedience to God’s perfect, loving will, Mary was thankful for God’s coming.

Once, just once, upon a time, a young woman, feeling the pains of a birth about to happen, staggered into a stable with her husband, a typical place for the humblest of people to stay in towns where they weren’t wanted, and wanted nothing more than the Son of God to come out like any other healthy baby. And so, he did. He came out to start life as perfectly as any baby starts life. The stable was a mess. Mary’s life was a mess. The world was a mess. But Jesus, this newborn baby Jesus, was perfect.

Once, upon a time, the one true story of God’s perfect love on earth began. To the world, it looked like any other imperfect story: A poor mother and father, miles away from home, lost in the middle of crowds of people, just trying to pay their taxes. Their story looked unimportant to the world. But to God, it was the beginning of the most perfect love story of all time. A story with the happiest ending of all time. A story that God invites us to start again every year at Christmas, because it’s never too early or too

late to have faith in the goodness of God's story of love.

It is the story of love that was there with us from the moment that we came into the world, love that will be waiting for us even when we've turned our back on God's love, love that will help us to look at the painful truth of where we fell short of deserving God's love, love that will help us to become better and better at loving the world as God always loves us, love that will be with us and, through faith, in us, when we take our final breath.

The universe is a big place, but not bigger than the love of God that has come to us on this tiny planet Earth through faith in Jesus Christ, love that came down on that first Christmas, as all of the universe bowed down before a little baby, away in a manger. The story has begun again. Once upon a time, God began the story of Jesus, because the universe is a story, and God wants it to be a story of perfect love, now, and for all time.

And now, once, on this night, the story gets to start again in our hearts. It is never too late or too early to let the story of Christ being born to be born again in your heart. The stars look down on us. The earth is hushed. The baby Jesus sleeps in heavenly peace. The candles glow, inviting God's perfect love to glow again in our hearts, like the love we have for a perfect baby. Let the story of God's hope win your heart. Let the story of God's love win your heart. Let the story of God's joy win your heart. Let the story of God's peace win your heart. Let the rest of your story be part of God's perfect story, so that every day we can say to God, as Mary did, "Thank you." Merry Christmas. Amen.