

Once upon a time, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary. And he came to her and said, **“Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”** But she was greatly troubled at seeing an angel and with what he said. And the angel said to her, **“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You’re going to have a baby, by God’s Power, and you shall call his name Jesus.”**

And Mary said, **“Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be unto me according to your word.”** And the angel departed from her.

When the angel left, Mary – still in a bit of a fog – looked around her to see where the angel went. Instead of seeing an angel, she saw that everything looked just the same as before...except she saw a small brownish looking rock where the angel had been standing. **“HMMMM,”** she said and pondered this in her heart.

A few months later, Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth, an old woman, who was also having a baby. (Elizabeth’s baby would be John the Baptist.) When Mary arrived, Elizabeth said: **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the baby inside me leaped for joy.”**

Then Mary and Elizabeth sang a little bit; and then Elizabeth went inside to take a nap, for she was heavy with child, and this visit had worn her out. When Elizabeth went inside, Mary looked and saw a small brownish looking rock right where the Elizabeth had been standing, when Mary first arrived. **“HMMMM,”** she said and pondered this in her heart.

Some months later, when Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, laying him in a feeding trough in a stable, for there was no room for them in the inn.

Later that night, some shepherds came to visit. They told Mary and Joseph that they had heard all about their baby boy’s birth, from a bunch of angels who had lit up the sky out in the countryside, singing and such. After the shepherds left, Mary was surely worn out. Giving birth to a baby in a stable and then entertaining a bunch of shepherds is quite a bit of work for one night.

But, before she drifted off the sleep, she saw through the cracks in her eyelids, a small brownish looking rock where the shepherds had been standing. **“HMMMM,”** she said and asked Joseph if he saw the same rock, explaining how this same rock seemed to keep showing up.

“Ah, Mary, my dear, that’s no rock,” said Joseph. **“Don’t you know: it’s a turtle. That’s its shell you’re seeing.”** And he picked up the turtle and showed it to her. The turtle’s feet and head popped out, and Mary thought for sure that the turtle smiled at her.

And just before Mary drifted off to sleep, she thought the turtle talking to her heart: **“Mary, you kept seeing what you thought was just a rock. But inside that rock looking shell is my life. I came to remind you that God also saw inside a simple peasant girl like you a really good life – made in God’s own image. And this Baby that was born will show all people, that like me, they may seem like just an old rock. But inside each person is a really good life – made in God’s own image – precious and beautiful to behold.”**

And THAT is why the Christmas Turtle is such an important symbol at Christmas: God became a plain ordinary human so that each human can realize that God is inside them, too – each one, like Jesus: a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold. Like a turtle’s life inside an ordinary shell that just looks like an ol’ rock.