

Christmas Eve 2017

Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't you love that story? Mary and Joseph travelling to Jerusalem. Mary giving birth and laying her newborn baby in a manger. The shepherds, the angels, and Handel's *Messiah* playing in your head during the reading... well, maybe not for everybody, but I can't be the only one. What is it about this story that is so compelling, so heartwarming, so comforting?

We only have to think for a moment to realize that the experience of living through a story like this is very different from its telling. It starts with an 80 mile walk from Nazareth to Jerusalem. Imagine walking from here to Springfield. That's about the distance. Now consider that travel like that in the ancient world was dangerous. Jesus' story later in this same Gospel about the Good Samaritan tells you all you need to know. Travellers got beaten up and robbed all the time – and much worse. And then there's Mary. After this long, stressful trip she had to give birth, which sounds wonderful in a story, but in real life, as many of you know, it is a painful, bloody mess. And also dangerous. It is estimated that women in the ancient world had a 1-2 percent chance of dying each time they gave birth. Mary might have trusted the angel's earlier promise that she would indeed deliver this child. But she might also have worried that his birth would be the death of her, because chances are she knew someone who had died that way. And on top of all of this, there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the upper room of their relative's house where they normally would have stayed. They had to stay down below in the animals' room, the baby in the animals' feed box.

So far, though, this is just the story of a young couple enduring the indignities of everyday life in Roman-occupied Palestine. There were many other couples with troubles of their own. And it seems unlikely that Jesus was the only child born that night in Bethlehem and the surrounding country. But then there are those shepherds, and their story of the angels. Babies get born every day, but angels appear to shepherds hardly ever. Especially with such specific information, and such remarkable news that heaven and earth are being brought together in the birth of this child. The story of their encounter with the divine amazed all who heard it, and also caught Mary's attention. What did she make of all of this, on top of her own previous encounter with an angel?

There is a popular Christmas song that's been around for a quarter century now called "Mary, did you know?" I expect many of you have heard it. Some of you might even know all the words. If you haven't heard it, I would recommend the version sung by the Pentatonics on their 2014 Christmas album. Anyway, this song asks over and over again, "Mary, did you know..." "Did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters? That he would give sight to a blind man? That he would calm a storm with his hand?" Did you know that "when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God?" This song kept popping into my head over the past week or so as I studied and thought about the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel. My answer was, "of course she didn't know all that. How could she?" I discovered, though, that there has been some controversy about this song, with one blogger last year calling it "the most biblically illiterate Christmas tune."¹ Personally, I would have given *Frosty the Snowman* or *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* that honor, or *White Christmas*, or *Silver Bells*. But what do I know? But this blogger was incensed about this song, smugly declared that "of course Mary knew, because the angel Gabriel told her, and if you'd just read the Bible you'd know that." Except that if you look carefully you'd see that he didn't actually tell her *any* of these things. We had that text as our Gospel reading this morning, and what the angel did tell her, pretty clearly, is that her child

¹ Holly Scheer, *Why 'Mary Did You Know' Is The Most Biblically Illiterate Christmas Tune*. (<http://thefederalist.com/2016/12/21/mary-know-biblically-illiterate-christmas-tune/>)

would be the long hoped for Messiah. But the angel did not tell her what that meant, or that God's anointed one would not be what Mary and her people were expecting and hoping for. The blogger carelessly imported the understanding of the later church into the biblical text, as if Mary could know what we know, or believe what we believe about who Jesus is and what it means for him to be the Messiah.

It's hard to know what Mary knew or didn't know, but later clues from Luke indicate that she was far from omniscient. There was that incident when Jesus was twelve years old and went missing from his family as they were traveling back home from Jerusalem. Mary clearly did not know that he would be in the temple, or she wouldn't have spent three days looking for him. In fact, the text tells us explicitly that Mary did not know that Jesus had stayed behind as the family travelled.

Whatever Mary knew, the text of the Christmas story tells us that she was paying attention, that she was noting the things that were happening to her and that she was putting things together. That is literally what "ponder" means in the original text, to put or throw together. She was making connections, connections with what the angel first told her about conceiving a child, connections with her visit to her cousin Elizabeth who was herself pregnant for the first time, even though she was thought to be past her childbearing years. In tonight's text it's the shepherd's story that has her connecting the dots, but there's more to come: the prophecies of Simeon and Anna that we'll get in our readings next Sunday morning, and that incident with the boy Jesus in the temple that I just talked about. She may not have known just what was going on, or what precisely it meant, but she was watching and listening, paying attention and putting things together in her own heart and mind.

I'd love to know how Mary made sense of all of the things that she experienced in these first two chapters of Luke. But we don't get to know. With one exception, she largely disappears from the story after chapter two. You could say, though, that Luke then turns that task over to us. If Mary could recognize God at work in the midst of her difficult first-century life, if she could recognize herself as God's servant and instrument in God's mission of saving her people, then maybe we too could put together the events of the rest of the story to recognize the coming kingdom of God and its radical, revolutionary nature. This is a kingdom in which Jesus refuses to be the kind of ruler we're so stuck on, you know, the kind who use coercion, threats, and fear to keep people in line and enemies at bay, the kind of rulers who cynically manipulate those they rule, who divide and conquer, who reward the ruthless and oppresses the meek and the vulnerable. Jesus refuses to be that kind of ruler, and for that he will be killed. Mary did not know that. She could *not* have known that that is how God Messiah would usher in God's kingdom, that through suffering and death God reigns, that in the midst of murder and mayhem, humiliation and despair God is reconciling God's self with the world and putting heaven and earth back together.

Mary could not have known all of this, but she knew something was up. She watched, she listened, she paid attention to what was going on in the world around her and she put that together with the promises God made to her and to the shepherds. And what she saw and heard she treasured, and passed on to others when the time was right, and in so doing she who bore the Christchild into the world bore him again, with Luke's help, into the hearts of people throughout the world.

Why is this story so compelling, so comforting? Maybe its because beyond its sentimental value it conveys, in such a gentle and understated way, the promise that God has not given up on the world, that there is yet hope, even when life is at its most difficult, that God is with us, deep in the depths of our humanity, to save us from sin, death, and the power of evil and to set the world aright – peace on earth, and good will. That is the story that we ponder tonight, the story that we put together with the events in our own lives and in the world around us, and that we bear into the lives of all who desperately need good news. May we also treasure that divine message in our hearts, and may the peace of the new born Christ, the peace that truly passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.