

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
(adapted from Christ Church of Chicago, UCC, 2003)
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Christmas Eve Meditation
by Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell

"But Mary treasured all of these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2: 19). These words conclude Luke's account of the birth story that we just heard. The shepherds, sent to the stable by the host of heavenly angels to see the newborn boy are returning to their fields filled with amazement. Much of the excitement is over, and the young mother is left with her husband, her baby – and the barn animals. As she rocks her infant son, she begins to think back over the extraordinary events that have led to this moment. She wonders what it all means.

It's like that sometimes, isn't it? When we are in the midst of life, it is not always possible to sit back and ponder – to consider what it all means. We are too caught up in the living or in placing one foot in front of the other in order to just get through whatever is happening. Especially when what is happening is something out of the ordinary.

And Mary had plenty to ponder! From the day the angel announced that she would bear God's son, her young life changed forever. She had prepared herself to be like the other peasant women of the Galilee – a good and faithful Jewish wife and mother who would probably have a life of hard work and remain in the same small village all of her life. Then the angel came and shook that little world. But what could she do but accept her role – for, above all else, she loved and trusted her God? And amazingly, her Joseph, her fiancé, who could have doubted her and sent her away, came to believe, and refused to leave her. What a gift that was, for the gossip in the village would be harsh enough.

Though we cannot begin to know Mary's life in this long ago, faraway world, we might try to imagine the surprises that continued. An elderly cousin also pregnant after years of barrenness. That miracle child leaping in her womb upon encountering Mary. The unexpected journey so near to the time of the birth from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the command of the occupying Roman government. It was such a long way in land that was not friendly, trekking through hills and desert paths with crowds of other people. Sleeping on the ground as near to the warmth of a fire as they could manage. Fearing that the baby might be delivered on the road.

Arriving in Bethlehem without a place to stay. Being turned away over and over again. So many others had arrived first and filled all of the inns. All Mary wanted was a place to lie down and rest, get her strength back before the baby was born. The offer of the stable where the animals were kept was shocking at first. But, it did have advantages. The inns of those days were not like our modern hotels – not even like today's youth hostels – no choices from the pillow menu. People were crowded into large rooms together with very little privacy. At least the stable was warm and private, with only the animals to look on.

As it happened, there wasn't too much time for rest before the baby decided it was time to be

born. Afterwards, Mary wrapped him in cloth, and she and Joseph cuddled him and admired him. But when they settled down to finally sleep, their rest was interrupted by a huge commotion. It was a group of shepherds, for heaven's sake! Shepherds were the lowest of the low – not considered particularly trustworthy, and they didn't smell so great, either. But there they were, all with amazement in their eyes come to see the child for themselves. They talked excitedly, telling how the angels had come right out of the sky and sent them to the stable. They told how bright the stars were, especially one – and, look, there it was right over the stable. And the angels were there, too. And some other curious onlookers from the village. All in all, it was a most extraordinary night that would take Mary quite some time to sort out. To ponder what it would mean to be the mother of God, what this tiny child might be called to do.

Some of us tend to get stuck on the Christmas card version of the nativity – the charming stable, the loving parents, the sweet baby. The peacefulness of the scene. Everything is tidy and the angels are singing and the stars are shining in a cloudless sky. We forget the cold and the smell, the hardship and oppression that the people lived with every day of their lives. We forget that the world then was every bit as difficult as it is now and that peace was but a dream.

If all we do on Christmas Eve is celebrate with joy the birth of the Christ child, treating it as a respite from the troubles of our lives, we do not really know who Jesus is. We miss the meaning of the sacred event. It is much more than a remembrance of the birth of a sweet and gentle baby.

I have heard it said that Christmas is just meant for children. Indeed, just a few hours ago, the children sat here to hear this same story. They listened, eyes big and bright, perhaps filled with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads. But I think we sell them short. For children are better able to engage awe and wonder than those of us who have learned to be rational and suspicious of what does not meet our criteria of believability.

And this birth, after all, is what writer Madeleine L'Engle called "the glorious impossible." The birth of this child is a scandal. Not a scandal in the sense of its being born to an unwed mother! It is because God chose to come to live among humanity in human form. Not as a king or a rich, important person, but as a helpless, vulnerable child. It is a scandal because the child is born to a common couple and the announcement is made not to rulers and officials, but to other common folk.

This is the meaning of this birth – this Incarnation – which fulfills the promise that God has made to all people. Yes, it is an event of mystery and of wonder, one that is beyond our rational comprehension. But that is good news, not bad. It tells us that we are not the ones who control our world. We can be like Mary and like Joseph, allowing the mystery to break us out of our ways of knowing and of being. Only then can we enter into the realm of wonder and awe where the God of love and compassion lives. We can then, with the shepherds, stand in the light of the Star and claim that light that can illumine new paths in our lives. For the Good News has been proclaimed – the wondrous gift is given to you and to me and to all people. Let us, then, sing with the angels, "Glory to God, in the highest, and on earth, peace to all people."

Amen.