

FACES AT THE MANGER

Mary: A Painful Joy

Luke 1:26-38

December 15, 2024

A friend of mine was recently telling me about his attempt to counter the hostile commercial takeover of Christmas in his own home. Desperately hoping to teach the true meaning of the season in a tangible way, he ordered one of those do-it-yourself cardboard cutout nativity sets. You know, the ones with the stable and the manger, the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, wise men, instructions. Fold on the dotted line. Place tab A in slot 2. It was a disaster. Nothing worked the way it was beautifully pictured on the box, and before long the kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, disfigured pieces. Unfortunately, one of the shepherds was decapitated. My friend was searching for the Scotch tape when he heard his four-year-old, the one whom he was hoping to explain the meaning of Christmas, say with a sigh, "Daddy, where is God in all this mess?"

And that's the question Luke aims to answer. Do not be preoccupied by the angel—this is a human story.

In the days of King Herod of Judea. That's how it starts, and it's more than a timestamp. *A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.* The story Luke tells is set in the shadow of empire. It is circumscribed by the sinister schemes of a ruthless ruler, and if we ignore the setting, we fail to grasp the gravity of what comes next.

Into this mess, the messenger of God appears. Not in Rome. Not in Jerusalem. Not to Caesar or to Herod. Gabriel visits Mary. Gabriel arrives in Nazareth. And once there, he does not describe the dramatic arrival of a divine warrior who will overthrow the oppressors. He says there is a baby on the way. A human child. And that's where we will find God in the mess.

Do not be preoccupied by the angel. Watch Mary's face. This is a human story. And before Mary, Gabriel waits. In that moment, I wonder what visions flash before her eyes. After all, the future she had imagined for herself is now totally upended. Her engagement to Joseph the builder. How can that continue? A quiet life in a country town. Not now. What will become of her? Of her child? Of God's child? It's a messy moment.

Earlier this year, I learned a new phrase that has its origins in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, but I found it helpful in this season. That phrase is: *bright sadness*. It is used to describe those moments on our journey where deep awareness of God's presence sits alongside our suffering. It is the dark before the dawn on Easter morning. In my mind's eye, the encounter between Mary and Gabriel is cast in bright sadness. The coexistence of genuine joy and very real grief.

Remember, Luke is telling a human story. And I trust that all of us who exist in the human world can relate to this. For some of us right here, moments of personal joy feel inappropriate in the context of so much suffering around the globe and close to home. For some of us, it seems insensitive to celebrate while so many mourn. For others right here in this space, the intimate experience of grief this year or the constant presence of pain lead to a longing for the joy that everybody else seems to have. After all, the social media feeds of friends and strangers drive the narrative that we are the only one who is not merry and bright this season. We see perfectly produced pictures and wonder how everyone else makes it look so effortless.

Friends, here is the truth of Luke's Christmas story: the distance between joy and pain has never been far. In fact, the two are so deeply intertwined as to be

occasionally indistinguishable. Bright sadness. The dull throb of pain still there when we are at the height of joy. And somehow joy finding us even when the burden of our suffering seems greatest.

When her son is only eight days old, Mary hears the haunting words of Simeon in the temple. *Your son is destined to be a sign that will be opposed. And a sword will pierce your own soul.* Yes, from the outset, the joy of Christmas is punctuated by the certainty of coming sorrow. The second stanza of the carol "What Child Is This" does not spare us the truth:

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be borne for me and you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary."

And so, what is the word of God for us on this third Sunday in the season of Advent? It is this. *God is in the mess. God is in the human story.* And because of this, joy is possible. Not as a replacement for pain, but right there next to it. The final words of Gabriel spoken to Mary serve as the foundation for our all faith. *Nothing will be impossible with God.*

Consider this. These words are not only a promise about the miraculous birth of Jesus. They do not refer only to the grand and glorious. They suggest that it is possible to find joy even in sadness, and that you can welcome that joy when it arrives. You do not have to wait for everything to be perfect, for all to be right with the world, for the future to be known, to receive the gift of joy. This bright sadness is possible because nothing is impossible with God.

That's the promise that precedes Mary's resolute response, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." It is the answer of the faithful. Of Abraham and Jacob, of Samuel and David, of Isaiah and Mary. "Here am I," she says, and in these few, simple words, Mary announces her bold decision.

She is not naïve. Her face is firmly set for the future she now embraces. Mary's acceptance of this joy is

already shadowed by the pain that it will bring. And she says yes to *both*, trusting that God will be with her, that the journey ahead is worth all that it will bring.

So, what about us? When the opportunity comes to put God's love into practice – and it will come – how will we respond? Will we have the courage to welcome both the joy and the pain? To believe that God is with *us* in this mess? Will we choose to believe that this ancient story is still being written in *our* lives? In our world?

When all is said and done, that is our God-given call. To trust that in the mess of life, the celebration and the sorrow, the hope and the fear, the grief and the gratitude, the joy and the pain, God chooses to be *with* us. God chooses us.

And so, with Mary, let us respond:

Here we are. Your servants.

Here we are, anxious and afraid.

Here we are, compelled by courage that is not our own.

Here we are, willing and vulnerable.

Here we are. Come what may,

we place our lives in your hands.

Now put your life in our hands. Amen.