



December 16, 2007
Advent 3

Luke 2:15-20
The Strange Family
M. Craig Barnes

Most people will work hard to be with the people they love at Christmas. It just seems right to be with family for this sacred holiday. But it is important to remember that the first Christmas consisted of a family only God could have put together.

+++

Everybody loves a children's Christmas pageant. You've all been to them, and you know exactly what is going to happen. Well, actually with kids you never know what will happen. But you do know what is supposed to happen. You know all of the characters and all of their lines.

There are the beautiful cherubs who play the role of the angels. Dressed in white—always, with gold tinsel halos, they announce the good news of great joy for all the people. Often someone has told them to stress the word, "Behold!" As a young girl angel once ad-libbed, "Behold you guys!" Cowering in front of them are the shepherds, always in drab colored robes, and often dragging around some poor kid dressed as a sheep. They are supposed to look surprised by the angels.

The real character role always goes to Herod who is supposed to look as despicable and scary as possible as he speaks to the three wise men. For some reason I always imagine Edward G. Robinson in this role, which is a bit tricky for a child to pull off. Speaking of the wise men, they get the best robes of anyone in the pageant and for some reason, though not a biblical one, there are always three of them.

Joseph is pretty much beside the point in these pageants. He has little to do except look pathetic when he talks to the innkeeper. Have you ever noticed that this scene is never scripted? Joseph just holds up his hands in a pleading gesture as the innkeeper waves him away. Usually someone is reading scripture during this sad scene.

Mary is, of course, the star of the pageant. She walks on stage with Joseph, drops baby Jesus into the manger, and then smiles so beautifully to the audience. Usually the little girls who portray Mary try to wear the same serene face you see on all of the masterpiece paintings of the Madonna and child. The medieval and renaissance artists depict serenity in Mary out of honor for her, as well as to honor the church that was paying for their art. But the biblical text doesn't depict a serene Mary.

The text depicts a confused Mary who ponders the lines she hears from everyone else in this strange pageant of the incarnation, when God became one of us. In the first chapter of Luke, when the angel announced to Mary that God was with her, we are told that she was perplexed by his words and pondered them. In Luke chapter two, when the shepherds told Mary what they had seen and heard in the fields on the night Jesus was born, we are told that Mary again pondered their words, treasuring them in her heart. As Luke continues, twelve years later when Mary and Joseph lose Jesus and find him in the temple, he told them, "I must be about my father's business." And again, we're told that Mary treasured these words in her heart.

To ponder means to treasure words or experiences that you know are very important but not very clear. Mary does quite a bit of that. Maybe this Christmas finds you pondering the work of God in your life as well. Clearly, you are not living the life you had planned. Some things you were counting on, like the modest plans of this Galilean woman, have not occurred. Something you were not counting on has occurred. Maybe it happened at work or at home. But something has interrupted to change everything in your life. You keep hearing from others that God is with you. But at this point, the sacred drama is ponderous.

You know all of the lines of all of the characters who have become a part of your family again this Christmas. There are the angels who make the most extraordinary announcements: “For unto you a Savior is born.” You hear this message every time you come to church and every time you listen to a sacred carol. Others around you have taken on the role of the shepherds. They are so obviously in the Christmas spirit and so obnoxiously, evangelically, happy as they walk around “glorifying and praising God for all that they have heard and seen.” You envy their joy and delight over the holy event that has only caused you a lot of stress. But you take their joy seriously even though the best you can do is ponder it, and take it to heart.

Unfortunately there is always someone in the drama of your life who takes on the role of Herod. Evil, dark, and determined, he will do whatever it takes to destroy any hope you have that God really is with you. Herod can be at your harsh workplace, in your strained finances, in the bad lab report you received from the doctor, or in the empty stocking that belonged to someone you loved who died last year.

Hopefully there is also a Joseph or two in your life this Christmas. These are the people who don’t really understand what is going on in your life, but they love you and so they stick with you. However, even their devotion can seem like a burden at times. You know that you are not making their lives easier. In fact, you know that it costs them to stay with you. How many times must Mary have said, “Thank you” to Joseph?

You may eventually even encounter a wise man or woman who bows before the interruption in your life as if it is a holy miracle. And that will make you ponder all the more.

If this is your role in the Nativity pageant, if you get to play Mary this year, you don’t have to look serene about it all. You don’t have to try to get into the Christmas spirit. The way the drama unfolds, it is the Spirit who gets inside of Mary. For now, what God has conceived will remain ponderous. So you just have to treasure it, and take it to heart. In time, the salvation will become clear.

When my daughter was a very little girl, her grandfather began a practice of giving her a savings bond every Christmas. You should have seen her face when she unwrapped that gift. It was always a look of total confusion, and it wasn’t nearly as exciting as the new doll or toy. Over the years she learned just to hand it to me, and I would keep it with the others in a safe place. But by the time she grew up and was ready to go to college, she had matured. And so had the bonds. Then she understood the gift, and she was so very thankful.

As every child in the Christmas pageant understands, we are only celebrating the birth of our hope at Christmas. If you don’t understand how this drama is leading to peace in your troubled heart, let alone peace on earth, just take the ponderous promise to heart. In time, the salvation will unfold.

When Jesus began his ministry thirty years later, apparently no one knew about his miraculous birth. The Glory Alleluias of the shepherds were not passed down. We are given no evidence in the gospels that anyone knew about that. That is the way of the ecstatic shepherd-like experiences. They only last for a short while. But Mary and her pondering heart were still a persevering part of the story. She is the only link between the baby and the man—just Mary and the growing conviction within her that something was happening. It is as if Luke is developing a subplot with Mary who is grappling to understand the gift she received on Christmas Eve.

In the second volume of his writing, the Book of Acts, Luke makes a point of placing Mary in the upper room with the other disciples where they are waiting and praying as the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus told them to do. So when the Holy Spirit came with the power of a rushing wind at Pentecost, Mary was there. And when Peter was filled with the Spirit and began to preach, calling Jesus the Messiah, the inheritor of the throne of David, Mary recognized those as the same words the angel used when the Holy Spirit came upon her and she conceived Jesus.

I think that this was the time when Mary finally got it. Now the hope has matured. Now she has what the Shepherds had thirty-three years earlier. But for her, the hope came not in a moment; it came over the course of a lifetime that is finally understood.

The Christmas story is so simple that any child can act out the parts. But for many of us, it takes most of our lives to receive all the strange drama of salvation.

Benediction: Some of Christ's gifts take a long time to unwrap. This certainly includes the Christmas gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. Amen.