

MYSTERY IN THE MANGER



Scripture:

Psalm 146:5-10

⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Before I read this scripture passage called "The Magnificat," I want to catch you up on what has already happened in the birth story of Jesus.

In the days of King Herod, Zechariah was in the temple, and an angel appeared to him saying he would be having a son whose name will be John, and he will have the spirit and power of Elijah to make the people ready to receive the Lord. Zechariah questioned the angel Gabriel about the miracle baby because his wife, Elizabeth, was too old. So he was made mute until the birth of John for thinking it was impossible.

Mary was the cousin of Elizabeth and when she became pregnant with Jesus, Gabriel told her, "Nothing will be impossible with God!" So she went to visit Elizabeth who also was experiencing a mysterious miracle pregnancy. And the baby inside Elizabeth leaped with joy at their meeting. Now Mary sings to Elizabeth.

Luke 1:46b-55

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has

scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



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Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months. It was a smart move for a pregnant unwed teenager to go away to a peaceful loving place, wasn't it?

Mary's predicament is a mystery though, isn't it? Why would God want to connect with humans by coming to earth in the form of a baby in such a controversial way? Why not arrive to a married couple that already had kids? Biblical scholars explain that Mary had to be perfectly pure. Teenaged Mary was considered "pure and faithful." However, everyone around them who saw Mary's pregnancy must have believed Joseph was responsible. So there is mystery around Christ's birth from the start.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH STORY

In the span of history, the virgin birth story of Jesus is not unique. About five thousand years before the Christian era, Mut-em-ua, the virgin Queen of Egypt, was said to have given birth to the Pharaoh Amenophis the III, who built the temple of Luxor. The story of his virgin birth was written on the wall of the Holy of Holies in the Luxor Temple that still stands in Egypt.

A story from Athens, Greece also claims that Plato was a son of a god. It was said that his mother conceived him immaculately in 428 BC by the god Apollo. They say that Apollo himself revealed the circumstances of this conception to Ariston, the betrothed husband, who married Plato's mother anyway.

Poor Mary is caught in the middle of this kind of story. Mysterious isn't it? A re-telling of Greek and Egyptian myths can make us wonder if this truly is how Jesus came to earth. What do you believe?

Brian McLaren in his book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, suggests that the story of the virgin birth is meant to "blur the line between what we think is possible and what we think is impossible."

THE MAGNIFICAT

Today we are focusing not on the factual truth of the birth story of Christ, but on the hope embedded in the beautiful song Mary sang called "*The Magnificat*." As it reflects on how Mary's soul "Magnifies" the Lord, it also teaches us about justice and humility and gives comfort through hope in God's saving grace for the lowly.

It may seem strange that Mary would break out in song like in some Broadway play. Yet her song is connected to many others sung by the saints in the past recorded in the Bible.

Key people in the Old Testament broke out into song when God's redemptive activity overcame many odds against them.

Moses and his sister Miriam sang a song after they were kept safe from the Canaanites, recorded in Exodus 15. Deborah sang a song about God's care for the lowly in Judges, chapter 5. And Hannah sang a song of joy when her barrenness ended with the birth of Samuel recorded in 1st Samuel 2.

In a commentary on the book of Luke by Thomas Walker he says, "Each of these songs celebrates the activity of God who keeps promises even in the midst of overwhelming odds. Echoes of these past songs can be heard in Mary's song that she sings in response to Elizabeth's greeting."

The Magnificat is a clear vision of God's intentions for all creation. It inspires and

instructs that anyone can participate in the magnificent future waiting for us. Mary's vision of the world may not be here yet, but she is singing with hope for a new reality.

Mary is aware that this child in her womb will impact human history. It's not everyday an angel comes to you to announce such a thing. So Mary knows this is serious and special despite the great mystery of it all.

GOD BECAME HUMAN

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects on the idea that no theologian or priest was at the manger in Bethlehem, and yet all of Christian theology has its origin in the wonder of all wonders -- that God became human.

Pastor Bonhoeffer says that if we don't take this season to reflect on the divine mysteries of God, then the glow of the divine has died out in our hearts. Is that true? Has the materialism of Christmas replaced the glow of reverence for the divine in your heart?

Clearly you all here today have held onto that reverence. But what about all those out there who didn't take the time to come to church for the worship of God? What is the condition of their hearts? How might you help them recapture the divine mystery in the Advent Season?

Bonhoeffer says the lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and poverty. He suggests spending time with children who have open wide awake eyes and who know they are surrounded with mystery.

Bonhoeffer believes that when we are very still and quiet, we can get in touch with the mystery of Divine joy. Christmas time is meant to be a time to ignite within us a love for the holy and a reverence for divine mystery. Having a sense of awe and wonder over Christ's birth is natural when we fully realize the impact of this earth shattering event.

SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

In my *Painting the Stars* class on Wednesday nights we talk about Science and Theology. Last Wednesday we read about Matthew Fox's take on the word "awe." He said we should think of a.w.e. as an acronym for "Awakening to Wonder Everywhere." Fox believes we all need to become "re-enchanted with life and with what he calls our Cosmic Christ."

He says, Think, for a moment, about your own experiences of awe. When was the last time you gave yourself the gift of time to take in the wonder of being alive on the planet earth? I remember walking with my daughter when she was two years old. It took an hour to walk a block. Every twig and blade of grass and insect was a showstopper. How do we regain the wonder of a two-year old?

Eugene Peterson encourages us to join together in a community of wonder especially during Advent. He says, "Once a year, each Christmas, we must turn aside from our preoccupations and join together in a community of wonder.

"The wonder keeps us open and alive to life that is always more than we can account for, that always exceeds our calculations and that is always beyond anything we can create alone."

REDISCOVERING WONDER

Rob Bell explores the lack of wonder and mystery in our current daily lives in a video he calls: "*Rediscovering Wonder*." Let's watch.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF-V_t_NShw

Be prepared to experience the mystery in the manger once again this Christmas. It's okay to wonder: "What exactly is this mystery in the manger?" Believe in the Holy Spirit that created the universe and created us to have a special place within it. Let us, in our own hearts, dare to believe the impossible by courageously cooperating with God's creative pregnant power in us, for us, and through us.

If God can create the universe and possibly multi-verses and still have a special relationship with us, then I think God is also capable of coming to earth through a pregnant teenager in the form of a special human baby in a manger.

MIRACLES HAPPEN

Miracles happen all the time when we are open to them. Who would have believed that last week in North Dakota a large group of veterans would participate in a protest against the Army Corp of Engineers and then, on behalf of the United States military, apologize for all the damage done to Native Americans in the past two-hundred-forty years? A long awaited miracle of reconciliation occurred as a result of the two groups coming together for the common cause of keeping the Missouri River oil free.

Every day your heartbeat is a miracle, the sunrise is a miracle, your feelings of love for someone is a miracle. Gravity is a miracle.

In this Advent season find ways to appreciate the mysterious magnificence and miraculous wonder of it all as a loving gift from God especially wrapped up for you.

Benediction:

Dostoyevsky, one of the greatest novelists ever known, reminds us to be in awe and to:

*Love all Creation,
The whole of it and every grain of sand
Love every leaf
Every ray of God's light*

*Love the animals
Love the plants
Love everything.*

*If you love everything
You will perceive
The divine mystery in things
And once you have perceived it
You will begin to comprehend it
ceaselessly
More and more everyday.
And you will at last come to love
the whole world
With an abiding universal love.
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

Reference for virgin birth stories:

<http://www.hope-of-israel.org/originsVBmyth.html>

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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