



“Mary Pondered”

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***Christmas Day
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Luke 2:15-20***

This year, the Christmas season at Eden Church has been this wonderful blend of both new and old. We built our first Nacimiento with the help of our Latino neighbors and we had our first-ever bilingual Spanish-English service. That was the new and it was wonderful. We also had our traditional candlelight service last night and today, for the first time in a long time, our 147-year old congregation is celebrating Christmas Day in Pioneer Chapel, our 144-year old church home. A little church that was built back in the days when European-Americans were the newcomers and Mexicans, like Don Guillermo Castro, owned the land around here. A little church surrounded now by people of all races and faiths, living side by side. If these walls could talk, they would say: A little new, a little old, a little English, un poquito Español—we are truly living into the patchwork tradition that is our faith, our community and our church.

Today’s scripture about the arrival of the shepherds in Bethlehem to see Mary, Joseph and Jesus reminds me of all the times in my own life when I have been the visitor come to find the newborn baby. The memories of these visits form a patchwork quilt of their own, each visit a vivid square of memory of new parents and their stories. I always feel that it is a special privilege to be allowed inside the tender circle that is drawn around an exhausted mother and a newborn child.

One of the first babies I ever visited was the little girl my friends Meg and Steve delivered during the summer after we finished our graduate degree. It was a memorable visit because my friend Karl, ever the gourmand, brought an ice chest with champagne for the new mother, who had assiduously avoided alcohol for her entire pregnancy. In the hospital room, as we sipped champagne from paper cups, Meg cradled her baby and told us how after laboring for nearly 24 hours, the decision had been made to use Pitocin, a drug to speed things along. Unfortunately, the Pitocin seemed to have no effect whatsoever. That is, until the delivery team got busy with another mother and then suddenly, Meg’s baby was ready to come. Steve, pale but extremely happy, told us he yelled and yelled for help but when no one showed up, he delivered the baby himself!

When Scott’s daughter Sarai was due to deliver her second child Calvin, she and her husband Bill lived in Patterson, out in the Sacramento Valley, and planned to drive to Kaiser Hayward to

deliver. They asked us, since we live in Hayward, to meet them at the hospital to take their older daughter Susan home while mom labored and delivered. On Calvin's birthday, the call came at 4:30 in morning. We calculated it would take them an hour and 15 minutes to get there from Patterson. When Scott pulled in at 5:45, they had already arrived and delivered the baby. Turns out Calvin had decided to come just east of Livermore and Bill had driven over 100 mph down 580 to get to Kaiser before Calvin was born in the car.

You probably have your own patchwork quilt of memories about birth and visiting newborns. To me, each story of a new birth is both extremely ordinary, for after all birth happens every day, and extremely extraordinary, for having a child is rarely, if ever, according to plan or without the unexpected happening.

The Gospel of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is a good example, especially for its time. Ordinary and extraordinary. Mary, engaged to marry Joseph, becomes pregnant and travels with him to Bethlehem. Unable to find a room inside the inn, Mary gives birth outdoors and places her baby in a manger. From an outsider's perspective, it would seem an ordinary woman from an ordinary town gives birth in an ordinary fashion.

But where we can't compete is in Luke's category of extraordinary. Racing down I-580 at 100 mph might be astounding but angels trump it and all the other natal adventures. We lose count of the angels in Luke's story; even Luke resorts to calling them a host or an army. First, there is the angel who visits Zechariah. Not a particularly patient angel as he strikes Zechariah mute for his failure to believe his wife Elizabeth would conceive. Thankfully, Gabriel is a lot more patient with Mary. Interestingly, in Luke's account, no angel visits Joseph, creating a mystery for us as to how and if Mary shared her angelic news. Then, as today's scripture alludes, during the night of the birth, a host of angels appear to shepherds in the field and provide the angelic chorus to the announcement that a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord is born in Bethlehem. As you know, the shepherds race to Bethlehem and find Mary and Joseph and the baby. They share what they have been told by the angels and returns to their fields, praising God for all they have heard and seen. And Mary ponders all these things, the extraordinary news and the extraordinary nature of her ordinary baby.

The Call to Worship today is based on the first chapter of the New Testament Letter of Hebrews, which scholars believe was written sometime between 60 and 90 CE, probably 10 or more years before the Gospel of Luke was written. The angels, ever present in the mind of first century Jews and Christians, are present in the text here. But in this text, which may have been a liturgy for an early church celebrating the life of Christ, just as we are doing here today, there is an exponential growth in their extraordinariness of Jesus' birth. What was trumpeted by Luke's angels as the birth of a Savior or King, is, now the voice of God, saying not only is this the Son of God, but One who is not only the reflection of God's glory but also the exact imprint of God's being. The birth of the Son, this early church recites, is not God sending an agent or messenger, not just a Messiah or Savior, but one identical in all ways to God entering the world.

And angels? Ever-present in the minds of early Jewish and Christians, the angels are also present in the liturgy from the Letter to the Hebrews. Perhaps too present for the letter writer.

The author reminds the church that the Son is higher than the angels in many ways. Only Christ is Son of God, only Christ is worshipped by angels, and only Christ will rule forever, and only Christ is anointed with the oil of joy.

These two texts together tell an extraordinary story. Within 100 years of his birth, Mary's ordinary baby is not only Son of God, Messiah, Savior, but also higher than all other angelic messengers ever conceived by the human mind, so high that he is the imprint of God in all ways. It's a lot to ponder: Mary cradles an infant that is God.

Of course, all this language is so extraordinarily out of our experience. When I hear someone fussing about how a virgin could give birth as if that alone discredits the Christmas story, I always think, "Good thing they didn't read the rest of the story." Accepting that a virgin gave birth is the least of our problems when it comes to understanding the extraordinary story of a reign without end and a child who is the identical twin of God! Some would say: Incredible. Unbelievable. What a story.

Yet, over 2,000 years later, when we live a time when we know what the inside of an atom looks like and we have seen photos of the surface of Mars, and the Internet provides an answer to most of the questions that cross our mind, even in these days, here we sit celebrating the birth of this child.

I think Jesus and the Christmas story of his birth has endured through the ages not because of the virgin birth, the angels, or the incredible names the writers of Luke and Hebrews gave Jesus but because the extraordinary power of Jesus is the enduring power to heal and to move people today, so long after his birth and life. His is the power to move and heal.

I know this because he has healed and moved me. I have followed him from a place of sorrow where death had more appeal than life. And he has shown me that life, while we have it, is good and that death, when it comes, is nothing to fear. He has healed my broken heart and he has brought me into community with you here and he has pulled, pushed, and enticed me to seminary to learn more and to be more than I could ever have imagined just ten years ago.

I also believe this: he has healed and moved you. We live in a culture that glorifies individualism and making it on your own, a culture that has grown alienated by technology that makes us more in touch with people we cannot see than with the people right next to us. Yet, here you are together, in community with one another to sing and worship and to share with one another your hopes and dreams and your joys and concerns. You have learned to rely upon, trust, and love another for weakness that engenders compassion and for strength in the face of need. Together you embody the power of Christ.

And we have all seen this: Jesus Christ has the power to create community out of nothing. Through the power of stories written about him over two thousand years ago, he leads us to see that our highest calling is be aware of our neighbors and to love them as ourselves. Surely, someone with the power to lead us to the elementary school, the nursing home, the food pantry, the hospital, the community garden or the littered shores of the Bay, to create

community as he created community, surely that One is wielding a power of extraordinary strength.

Here's what I ponder when I hear the Christmas story: what if an angel had come to Mary and said: Mary, you will conceive a child whose clarion call for people to open their hearts and lives to those in need will echo through the ages. Mary, at the end of the year 2011, over 2 billion people will practice or live in countries where your son's prayers and stories will be read, studied, and preached, mobilizing people to have faith that life can be better -- and empowering them to make it so.

What if the host of angels who sang to the shepherds had been the heavenly chorus for this announcement: Today, in the city of Bethlehem, an eternal shepherd has been born, one who will keep a steadfast watch over all of us, loving and luring us into a single flock and so we may keep each other warm and safe in the cold nights of winter.

What if the writer of the Letter to Hebrews, wrote this: God spoke to us in the past through prophets, God speaks to us today through the birth of a Son, *and* God will speak to us always, in our hearts and through our hands when we become heavenly angels for the poor, the widowed, the meek, and the newcomer.

But most of all, like Mary, I ponder this: how can I cradle the glory of God in my arms? How does the ordinary hold the extraordinary?

I don't know the answer. But there have been moments when I thought I saw it happen. Maybe you have too. Here's one that I return to again and again because it is part of the extraordinary life God has given me.

When Scott and I decided to adopt a baby, we were hoping for an ordinary outcome. At the age of 41 and 55, we weren't exactly your ordinary parents, but like all parents, we wanted a healthy happy baby who would be our own. After waiting over a year, we were matched with an 11 month old baby and we flew to China with seven other families. On the day we met our soon to be daughter, we found ourselves waiting in a hotel lobby with 19 other people, including two grandmas, a midwife, and two translators. We weren't in labor pains but we were very nervous and the photos show it, as we stood and chatted about the weather or whatever would distract us while wondering how much longer we could wait. We boarded a bus to a government building and waited some more as we drove across town. We reached a crowded Civil Affairs building and went upstairs. And then, it felt sudden after all that waiting, in came seven babies, all girls and all dressed in identical pink outfits with red shoes. They were carried by the director of their home and four nannies, who were also wearing pink. As we crowded around, the director took the first baby into his arms and pulled a small slip of paper out of her sock and read it out loud, "Fu Hu Qi." No one said anything. The director looked around at our blank faces and said, "What's the matter? Don't you people know your children's names?" I spoke up and said, "She's the Malloys' baby. They're stuck downstairs!" And they were. Chris and Athena Malloy, Eden members who we first got to know in China, were on the first floor, waiting for an elevator and had suffered the torture of seeing their baby whisked by them and rushed upstairs to meet them. The director gave the baby who would become Quinn Malloy

back to a nanny and took a second baby. He pulled her name out of her sock and said, “Fu Hui E.” I was quick to say, “That’s our baby.” He said to the nanny, “This is Hui E’s mama.” And they handed Hui E to me, and she looked into my eyes and raised a tiny hand to touch my face. I held her in my arms and looked in her eyes. We didn’t speak the same language. For that matter, she didn’t speak any language at all but I knew in an instant what she was thinking: “*Where in the world have you been?*”

Wondering just what had taken me so long, I nestled her in my arms, held her close to my heart and carried her around the room, showing her each of her friends, all of whom she had lived with since she was only three weeks old. All around us, babies were being united with families and families were being united into a community of love and support, and communities, American and Chinese, were being patched together in this huge quilt of love. As the sign where Lia lived in Fuling, China says, *Love Knows No Borders*. At that moment, I was an ordinary person who had been moved by an extraordinary power to go an incredible distance to make a family and be part of a world that needs, more than anything else, more family, love and community.

On this Christmas Day, in our patchwork chapel in our patchwork community, I hope and pray that you will ponder the Christmas story for yourself. An ordinary baby, an extraordinary story. May you—today and everyday—lift Jesus out of his manger and nestle him in your arms, holding him gently, tenderly, and close so everyone you know may look upon him, for what he is, an ordinary child, yes, but also the extraordinary gift of God’s own self to each of us.

Amen.