

FOCUS: The Good News is Emmanuel! God with us!

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”¹ There was so much going on in that little stable in the village of Bethlehem. The birth of Jesus was traumatic enough. To give birth in a stable in a strange place away from family and friends added to the trauma. One can only imagine how much chaos there had to be when the grimy bunch of shepherds, likely with at least some of their flocks in tow. While she is trying to recover from childbirth and spend a few quiet moments with her husband and newborn son, in barge these roughneck shepherds. What was Mary to make of all this?

The shepherds had been out in the countryside, doing what shepherds do best—watching their flocks, trying to stay awake, and probably scheming how they might take advantage of some unsuspecting person to gain a few extra coins or an extra wineskin. Shepherds, you see, were not the nice, clean-cut characters as portrayed in most movies, Peanuts television specials, or wireless telephone commercials. Rather, shepherds at the time of the birth of Jesus were known to be rough, hard working, and rather unsavory characters. When King Herod or the emperor announced the birth of a new son, the shepherds would *not* have received an announcement, let alone an invitation to come see the newborn child.

Yet, the shepherds were chosen by God to be the first to hear of the birth of Jesus. While they were kibitzing and trying to stay awake, an angel of the Lord appeared in their midst. It probably didn't take long to get their attention. It's not every night that an angel pops in for a campfire chat with shepherds. It must have startled the poor shepherds, because the angel immediately says to the “Do not be afraid!” These were the angel's first words to the priest Zechariah when he learned that Elizabeth, in her old age, would become pregnant. These were also the words to Mary at the Annunciation when she, a young teenager by all accounts, was told that, in her young age, she would be the God-bearer. And again still, these were the words spoken to Joseph in his dream, and he was assured that everything was OK and that he should still take Mary as his wife. Angels are the messengers of the Lord, and they carry important messages to people. The Lord wants these messages heard and acted upon accordingly, so it's important that the receiver of the message is paying attention. Obviously, the words “Do not be afraid” were very comforting to the hearer.

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

And the angel brought the message—the decree—of God directly to these shepherds, men who rested on the margins of society. What a sharp contrast to the message brought from the emperor to *the whole world*. The emperor's messengers announced a census—a counting of the people throughout the known world—so that he might know how many subjects he had and how much he could expect in taxes and tribute. And the angel brought a simple, yet astounding, message: “I announce a cause for great joy among *all the people*.” Isn't it amazing? The angel brought the message of God that was to bring “great joy” to everyone and gave it first to a rag-tag bunch of shepherds. And the message the angel delivered? Well, it was nothing, really. Just that a Savior—the Savior—of these shepherds and the entire world had just been born in Bethlehem. Anticipating the obvious question, the angel tells the shepherds that there will be an obvious sign for them when they find the child. The child will be wrapped in strips of cloth—which, by the way, was the birthday attire of no less than King Solomon, the son of David, and every other royal child. And, the royally-wrapped child would be resting in a manger—a feed bin for barnyard animals.

And for good measure, just to ensure the shepherds were certain that the message came from the Lord and was *really* important, the angel was joined by a heavenly choir that praised God and declared peace on earth *to all people*. It must have been a remarkable sight for these lowly shepherds. In a most remarkable understatement, the shepherds say to one another: “Let's go and check this out!” and they scamper off to Bethlehem to find the newborn Savior—their newborn Savior.

¹ Luke 2:19 (NRSV)

“But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

The shepherds indeed found the child and Mary and Joseph. They told the couple what they had been told, and they no doubt paid homage to the child sleeping before them. They stayed in the manger as long as the thought they should, and then they left, telling all who would listen what they had been told, and what they had seen.

“And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”²

And how amazing it must have been—how unbelievable it must have seemed—to those who were not with the shepherds, but heard the reports of their experience. The Lord God simply didn’t send messengers to people like *shepherds*. They weren’t important. They weren’t trained in the Scriptures or anointed as prophets or called to be priests. They worked out in the fields, tended to their sheep, smelled badly, and acted worse. How could God choose *those people* to hear the announcement of the birth of something as important as the birth of the Savior—the Messiah? Simply amazing.

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

What else could she do? The events of the previous few days—the events of the past nine months—were overwhelming. It was hard for her to comprehend everything which had happened to her and to her family. She was a first-time parent, in a place far from home, with only the support of her husband and the charity of strangers. She was overwhelmed. All she could do is take in the events, accept the praises and prayers of the shepherds, and treasure the moment. She could only ponder—to reflect or consider with thoroughness and care—all that she had experienced.

Tonight, as we are gathered here in this place once again to hear a familiar story, it can seem overwhelming for us as well. Not simply because of all the preparation that has gone on in the weeks before, but also because of the magnitude of the story itself. It’s sometimes hard to believe that all this really happened. Sometimes, we get so wrapped up trying to discern what God is trying to tell us in the various books of the Bible, we overlook the obvious. Add to that challenge our attempts to figure out what God is expecting of us today, it is not hard to become overwhelmed.

For those of you who are hearing the story for the first time, let me assure you—simply and clearly—that Jesus the Christ, Son of God, was born *for you* to be your Savior. Jesus the Christ, Son of God, did live on this earth *for you* to be your Savior. Jesus the Christ, Son of God, did die on the Cross *for you* to be your Savior. This is the Good News. This is the Gospel message. Don’t let it overwhelm you. Treasure the things you have heard in your heart, and ponder them.

For those of you who have heard the story so many times before, let me assure you—simply and clearly—that Jesus the Christ, Son of God, was born *for you* to be your Savior. All that you have heard before is true. The angel—the messenger of the Lord—came to Mary and announced that God had chosen her to be the God-bearer—the mother of Jesus. The angel came to Joseph and assured him that everything would be all right. The angel came to the shepherds to proclaim the Good News that, on that night, a Savior was born for all the people. On that night, in Bethlehem, the city of David, the Savior was born.

“But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them.”

Just as it was a good thing for Mary to reflect with thoughtfulness and care, so to is it a good thing for us to reflect on *this* night with thoughtfulness and care. The Savior is born. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth!

² Luke 2:18b (NRSV)