

**SLOW DOWN FOR REFLECTION**  
The Christmas You've Always Longed For  
Luke 1:39-45, 56

There is a delightful story about young children in a nativity play. Five-year-old Claire was playing Mary. And five-year-old Olivia was an angel. Before the show, young George was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel.

George then turned to Claire and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?"

Claire said simply, "I'm Mary."

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, George felt he needed to justify his own role. So with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part he said, "It's hard being a sheep, you know."

Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know."

I think Claire has something there, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with all the temptations that abound in our society almost everywhere you look.

Last week, we talked about the "Virgin Mary" and her trust in God. I have asked our webmaster, to put the message on our website. Also, on the table in the lounge, there are some printed copies for your interest.

Mary's receptivity to hearing from God, her humility and her readiness to serve were at the root of her trust in God. And her attitude of trust in God is worth pondering seriously this Christmas. I believe her kind of trust lays a solid foundation for our theme: *The Christmas You've Always Longed For*. In fact, next Sunday and the fourth Sunday in Advent, we are going to keep looking at Mary's life and how her example will help us make this Christmas one we have always longed for. And don't forget on Sunday Dec. 16<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 a.m., the choir will present an inspiring Christmas cantata titled *The Winter Rose*.

I wonder if Mary found it hard being a virgin. It is clear from her encounter with the angel Gabriel Mary was a virgin. And I believe the underlying assumption was she wasn't knowingly going to change her condition until she and Joseph were married, not merely engaged.

I suspect, too, Mary realized fairly quickly that what was ahead for her had potential for great good, but also great harm. Her culture was not as tolerant as ours when it came to unplanned pregnancies. And what would Joseph say? He was a kind man and a good man, but would he believe her? And how long would it be before she began to show?

Mary had a lot to think about. We know from Scripture she was a very thoughtful person. In Luke Chapter 2, after the shepherds visited her and Joseph and told them what the angels had said, Luke wrote that "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." And there was the incident when Mary and Joseph, after three stressful days trying to locate their lost son, found 12-year-old Jesus talking with the religious teachers in the temple. They didn't understand Jesus' response to their reprimand. He said, "Why were you looking for me?"

Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" Again, Luke wrote, "His mother treasured up all these things in her heart."

If you were Mary, to whom would you go to talk about such an incredible experience? The visit by the angel. His message that she would have a baby – a boy – before she was even supposed to be pregnant.

Mary knew Elizabeth, her much older relative who lived in the hill country of Judea, was also going to have a baby. The angel told her so. You see, Elizabeth was not supposed to get pregnant either -- because she was too old. But as Gabriel said to Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God." It was as if God would confirm Mary's experiences through Elizabeth. Elizabeth would be the right person to talk with. And Mary had to find a place where she could work through what was happening, where she could slow down her racing and somehow find peace during this time of confusion.

Not that everything happened overnight. The last verse in this morning's Scripture passage reads, "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home." In my mind, I can picture her processing all the possible complications, asking Elizabeth for advice on occasion, walking and praying and listening for answers from God spoken to her heart.

At this time of the year, I suspect you and I have a lot to think about too, don't we? Although our experiences are probably not as astonishing as Mary's – to say the least. Nonetheless, there may be some things in our lives that, to us anyway, are dramatic enough. And even simpler things may require a slowing down to reflect and evaluate what we should be doing. Because I'm afraid that if we don't slow down long enough at least to do a little reflection/evaluation of our own, it's possible the season will leave us frustrated again this year.

If the real meaning of Christmas centers on God entering human history through a baby in a woman's womb, if our hope this season is for lasting peace and joy and love, then it's fitting, isn't it, to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ in the best way we can.

So ... what do you like best about past Christmases you have celebrated? And what have you found the most difficult or tiring or frustrating? What might you do to maximize the good things you enjoy? And if you could eliminate or cut back some activities or two tasks this year to help your celebration be truly joyful, what would those be? It's worth pondering, isn't it? I have outlined a few suggestions for the good in the bulletin insert. But these are only to ignite more ideas -- yours. If you take some time to reflect, I am sure you will find your own best ideas for you and your family and friends.

Here are some further thoughts to think about.

**Are there creative ways to think about our giving this Christmas?** Some families are large enough to wonder about reducing the number of gifts given or the cost of the gifts.. I know of one family where the adults especially, drew names and wrote a personal letter to the person whose name was drawn. They wrote what they appreciated about the other person. It then became part of that family's Christmas celebration to read those letters aloud. For many those letters were considered some of the most beautiful gifts they ever received and gave to one another.

Some people on our gift lists cannot even think of anything they might want or need for themselves. So some family members have agreed to surprise each other with a gift – for others instead! It can be one-stop shopping in a mission catalogue to find gifts of animals or water systems or classroom supplies or food or clothing or mosquito nets or soccer balls to give to individuals and families in need in other countries. There are all kinds of possibilities.

A few weeks ago, Marg and I took some precious slowing down time over a nice lunch to talk about our current circumstances with two ailing elderly mothers and not enough time. We came to some specific conclusions about the way we would give gifts this Christmas. It had to be different from other years for us. And our families seem to understand. Maybe because of your circumstances, you will have to do something different – even better – this year too.

**Are there creative ways of handling difficult relationships this season?** For instance, what might be done about the relative who can always be counted on to be antagonistic? Or the friend who always drinks too much during the holidays and can be most inappropriate? If you can anticipate that it's probably going to happen again, why not slow down and talk with someone older or wiser for advice as to a better response this year.

**Did you cry last Christmas and the Christmas before?** Could that be avoided this year if you don't feel you have so many things to do that the tasks become all but impossible? How do you cut back so you're not so tired and worn out you can't even enjoy the people you love the most? Not to mention celebrating Christmas – Jesus birth – with great joy like the shepherds. Those are the kinds of questions I'm wondering about. If you slow down a little and reflect, you might come up with some workable answers to questions like these earlier rather than later in the month.

Isn't the most important question for all of us: How will we mark the entrance into human history of the Messiah, the Christ? In all of the celebrating we do, what will we especially do to celebrate Jesus' birth? What would especially honour Him? What would delight Him most from us? Are these questions worth pondering? I think so!

Because I wonder if that is what's going to be most important to us when we go to bed on Christmas night. And it's what I'll give us a hand with next week, after you've had opportunity to do some initial Christmas thinking on your own.

Do God's desires for his people match the way Canadians celebrate this unique season? Probably not. It's wonderful that expressions of love and generosity mark this time of year more than the other 11 months. But we know our Christmases have become too highly commercialized and usually more self-centred than focused on the wonderful child who entered our world 2,000 years ago. So, again, I am suggesting, it may help us all to follow Mary's pattern of starting this month with adequate time for reflection.

Here's my simple thought in a sentence: *Knowing the chaotic days ahead have the potential to be both good and bad, it's important to slow down and reflect upon our actions to ensure that this special time is the best it can possibly be.*

I say this because we have this tendency to make mistakes as we rush around madly in all directions in our effort to get everything done! How sad if Mary had talked to the wrong person. What different counsel she might have received that could have ruined everything. What if she had felt sorry for herself or been insecure. I'm glad she took the action she did.

How wonderful that Mary slowed down and reflected quietly in the company of good counsel before beginning to live out her unique life!

What is happening with you this season? My hope and prayer is that each of us will experience a wonderful Christmas -- one we've always longed for. That is why I'm encouraging us to figure out what the equivalent of Mary's trip to the hill country of Judea would be in our circumstances. Maybe you and your spouse or a special friend could go out for hot chocolate to talk about what's important to you this Christmas. Or maybe you need a full family meeting around a big bowl of popcorn to talk about what's happening this Christmas. Mary, the younger, talked to Elizabeth, the elder. That could be a pattern some of us might want to follow. In any case, the bottom line is feeling good about how we honour Christ at this season and celebrate his birth. Slowing down for reflection and evaluation will help us find the best ways we can do this with our families or friends with exuberant joy.

Mary was receptive to hearing from God. And I believe God used Elizabeth to sharpen her receptivity and listening. Mary proved to be a wonderful choice to fulfil the role of being mother to Jesus. God trusted Mary with Himself. And Mary trusted God with herself. I'm absolutely amazed at how mature she was in living up to God's expectations.

I pray that each of us will take the time this season to slow down and evaluate first. That we will find our equivalent to Mary's experience of quiet reflection with Elizabeth. That what we do this year will enable us to ensure that this Christmas is the best celebration it can be -- full of joy and not merely activities. That in our feelings and spiritual response to God we will be more hopeful, more peaceful, more loving than we have been for many a Christmas. We may not do everything perfectly. But with prayerful reflection and hope we will have honoured the One whose birthday we are celebrating in the best manner we know. Amen.

Rev. Chris Miller  
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