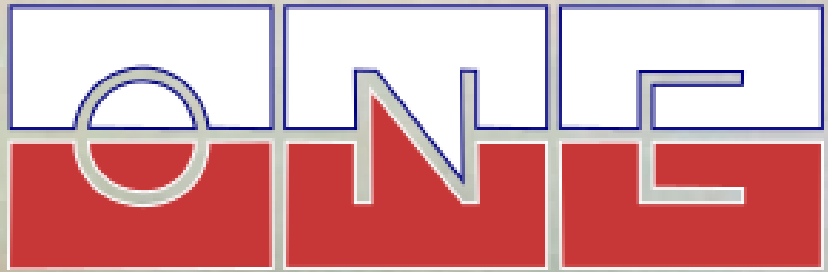
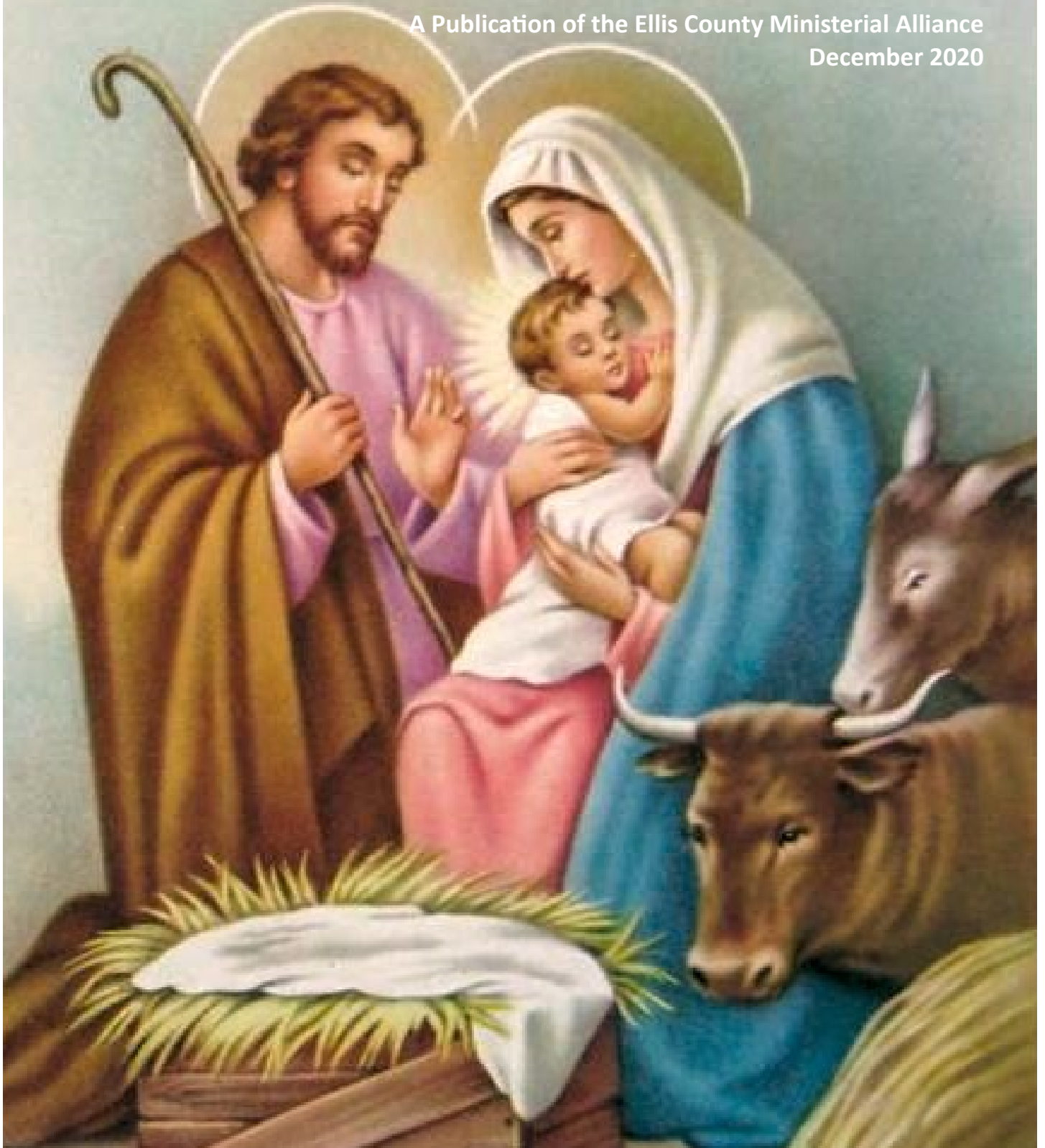


INSIDE:

+ **The Christmas Story
from Different Points
of View**



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Mary, Mother of Jesus, Is the First Believer

Cheryl Glassman

St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church

"In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, 'Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!'

"Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 'Don't be afraid, Mary,' the angel told her, 'for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!'

"Mary asked the angel, 'But how can this happen? I am a virgin.'

"The angel replied, 'The

Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.'

"Mary responded, 'I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.' And then the angel left her."
-- Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)

When I think back to my teenage years, I smile - but I also shudder. So much to learn, and the teenage mind goes in so many directions.

It was about the age of 14 that I had my first boyfriend. I remember seeing him and thinking how handsome he was - and then he smiled at me. My heart melted. I don't know if that's how it was for the Virgin Mary the first time she met Joseph, but she must

have truly been excited to think about being married to him.

The narratives and even the "Encyclopedia Britannica" depict Mary to have been between the ages of 13 and 17 at the time. There are also several mentions of her being "humble." Can you see her? A quiet, unassuming teenager, helping her mother, Ann, to care for the needs of her father, Joachim, and preparing in her heart to be the wife of Joseph.

Then, an angel appears to her and . . . wait . . . an ANGEL appears to her? Whaa...??? Think about it. Mary, just going about life, and in an instant the life that she knew changes. Gabriel says to her, "The Lord is with you" and that she is "favored."

I can picture her standing there, and in her mind she must have been trying to decide if she should scream or run. But then Gabriel tells Mary, "Don't be afraid," and he explains to her that through God's presence and the Holy Spirit, she will become the

Mary, Mother of Jesus, Is the First Believer (Continued)

Mother of God.

What a whirlwind. I imagine she was, at first, very afraid, but then, as Gabriel spoke, and as I hear and have read the story of the Annunciation over the years, every single time, I can sense that as Mary listened to Gabriel, true peace, joy, and profound understanding filled her heart. And when Gabriel tells Mary about Elizabeth she realizes that, truly, nothing is impossible with God.

After Gabriel leaves - probably as spontaneously as

he appeared - Mary sits in the quiet and privilege of the moment. She ponders the new reality of the road ahead of her. Mary was the first believer and first person to help us all understand what it really means to love and serve God.

She senses her life will be filled with so many challenges and emotions - some of which she has never known. And she will have a baby, a son. As we all listen to the words of the Annunciation, our lives, too, are changed. We are given

the challenge, like Mary, to hear God's message and to love and serve God as she did.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is for each of us a symbol of what it means to accept God's unconditional love and presence in our own lives, to hear His words, and to humbly serve Him. And we can smile as we know that Mary, in that moment so many years ago, realizes the true extent of her purpose - she will be the mother of Jesus, who will change our world forever.

Jesus Born Into a World of Danger, Uncertainty

Reverend Mike Rose

Hays First United Methodist Church

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

"So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be

married to him and was expecting a child.

"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." - Luke 2:1-7 (NIV)

Greetings in the Name of the Coming Christ Child!

Joseph and Mary were bringing the baby Jesus into an uncertain world. Rome ruled the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Taxes were to be paid to Rome, and so the Gospel writer Luke reports that

Caesar Augustus demanded a census be taken so the people could be taxed.

Each had to report to their family's town of origin, and so, in Joseph and Mary's case, that meant Bethlehem. Bethlehem was about three miles south of Jerusalem and a 90 to 100-mile trip from Nazareth in Galilee that they made on foot and on the back of a donkey. One can only imagine how Mary, great with child, managed the trip and how Joseph coped as they traveled this distance over rough roads and dangerous situations . . . depending on the road they took.

There were two main

Jesus Born Into a World of Danger, Uncertainty (Continued)

roads, or routes, that were available to those traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem/ Bethlehem. The shorter, more direct, route was also generally considered the most dangerous, because it went through the wilderness between Galilee and Judea, which was separated by Samaria. The wilderness way was a dry and rocky route. It was dangerous not only because of the wild animals one might encounter there, but also the robbers . . . and, as Jesus would find out later, the Devil himself. (Luke 4:1-2)

The other route was longer, but somewhat easier. It went from Nazareth east toward the Jordan River and was safer because there were more travelers and the terrain was not as difficult. Water in the Jordan River was plentiful and life sustaining. Jesus would affirm this as he later would be baptized by his kinsman, John, in the Jordan River (Luke 3:15-22) as he began his ministry.

The most dangerous part of the journey was generally considered between Jericho and Jerusalem, where robbers were known to ambush travelers. Jesus would later speak of the dangers of this part of the road in his "Parable of the Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:29-30).

Luke doesn't tell us which road the couple took, only that they faithfully went, regardless of the dangers and uncertainties. And Mary, great with child, accompanied Joseph, showing both the solidarity and love between the two . . . and God. While Jesus was born into a world of dangers and uncertainties, that love and solidarity with his earthly parents and with his heavenly Father would be rock-solid. It was a hope that the world needed desperately then, and it still does today.

It would be humble beginnings for the coming Messiah. Luke tells us that after Mary gave birth to Jesus,

she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there were no guest rooms for them. It was probably in a "garage-like-barn" under the main house that the residents used to shelter their animals at night and then take them out to graze in the day where the Messiah was born.

Such humble beginnings for the King of kings, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of lords. And yet, it was as majestic as it gets for those who hold love in their hearts.

So this Christmas, as you celebrate the Christ Child coming into the world, do so knowing that whatever road you take, if you take it with love and solidarity with God, you'll be on the right path, as long as you focus on keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing.

And from my family to yours, have a blessed Christmas as you journey with God and those you love.



WHO CAN ADD TO CHRISTMAS? THE PERFECT MOTIVE IS THAT GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD. THE PERFECT GIFT IS THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON. THE ONLY REQUIREMENT IS TO BELIEVE IN HIM. THE REWARD OF FAITH IS THAT YOU SHALL HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.

- CORRIE TEN BOOM

'Do Not Be Afraid' Still Resonates Today

Becky Rogowski

First Presbyterian Church

"There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. It was night, and they were looking after their sheep. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. And the glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified.

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.'

Suddenly a large group of angels from heaven also appeared. They were praising God. They said, 'May glory be given to God in the highest heaven! And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!'

The angels left and went into heaven. Then the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us

about.'

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby. The baby was lying in the manger. After the shepherds had seen him, they told everyone. They reported what the angel had said about this child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary kept all these things like a secret treasure in her heart. She thought about them over and over.

The shepherds returned. They gave glory and praise to God. Everything they had seen and heard was just as they had been told." -- Luke 2:8-20 (NIRV)

Why were the shepherds chosen by God? They were lowly, unknown, and obscure. They were merely trying to do their job - looking after the sheep. It was a quiet and peaceful time for them. God knew this was the perfect time to get their attention.

Yet, the angel of the Lord appeared to "them." The angel announced the birth of the Savior, and "they," responding in simple faith, came to worship the babe. Then they went on their way--telling the good news.

This is more than a heartwarming account of what took place 2,000 years ago. It is an example for us today--each of us. It is not enough for us to treat the birth of Christ as our "December tradition." We must truly accept the message and true purpose of Christ's coming to Earth.

The shepherds' lives were forever changed on that night. If the Christmas story doesn't change our lives, we have missed its real meaning and purpose.

When does God talk to us? Much like with the shepherds, he seeks our times of quiet and stillness. Often we notice it during sickness and injury. Perhaps we need to schedule more "quiet time" (not more sickness or injury). Just as our bodies need rest, we also need times of spiritual retreat to allow God time to speak to our hearts.

The angels spoke, "Do not be afraid." The shepherds were definitely afraid. Why was a heavenly visitor talking to them? Had they upset God? Were they dreaming? The angel puts their fears to rest with the assurance, "Do not be afraid."

These comforting words are found nearly 100 times in the Bible. The Lord knows we have

'Do Not Be Afraid' Still Resonates Today (Continued)

fears. Research shows anxiety and depression are on the rise. We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. We have accepted isolation and socially distancing since the last telling of the Christmas story. Fear is real.

In every case, our fears can be calmed if we put our trust in God. "Do not be afraid." The angels brought good news. No more waiting, no need to delay. Christ is born TODAY. The prophecy had been fulfilled. This wasn't the end of the story, though. It was the

start of something truly special, but it required that people were listening. It required that people believed. It required that people had trust. It required faith.

These things seemed far-fetched and even "scary," thus creating fear. It happened just as God had said it would, though. This is what God does. The words are there. He is there. The rest is up to us. We have to listen. We have to believe. We have to trust. We have to have faith. God comes through when we let him.

I can't help but think of the Peanuts character, Linus, when reading this passage. In the classic movie, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," Charlie Brown brings a tree that is less than perfect and everyone accuses him of ruining Christmas. But lowly Linus reminds everyone of the true meaning of Christmas by reciting this passage. So we are reminded to listen. Listen and hear the word of God. Do not be afraid.

Wise Ones Still Seek Christ's Light Today

Reverend Celeste Lasich

Hays First Presbyterian Church

"Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea during the time when Herod was king. When Jesus was born, some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, 'Where is the baby who was born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'

"When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, as were all the people in Jerusalem. Herod called a meeting of all the leading priests and teachers of the law and asked them where

the Christ would be born. "They answered, 'In the town of Bethlehem in Judea. The prophet wrote about this in the Scriptures: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not just an insignificant village in Judah. A ruler will come from you who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel."'

"Then Herod had a secret meeting with the wise men and learned from them the exact time they first saw the star. He sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, 'Look carefully for the child. When you find him, come tell me

so I can worship him too.'

"After the wise men heard the king, they left. The star that they had seen in the east went before them until it stopped above the place where the child was. When the wise men saw the star, they were filled with joy.

They came to the house where the child was and saw him with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their gifts and gave him treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But God warned the wise men in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they

Wise Ones Still Seek Christ's Light Today (Continued)

returned to their own country by a different way."
-- Matthew 2:1-12 (NCV)

Christians often want the story of Jesus' birth to be bathed in soft focused nostalgia, far removed from the troubles of daily life. Richly robed wise men bearing gifts and bright stars lend an exotic element to the working class shepherds and barn animals of a Nativity scene.

Yet God's word tells us that Jesus was born into risk and danger. His very birth was a challenge to the powers of an empire and evidence that God's love will not be confined to one country or people.

When King Herod heard from the travelers about a newborn King of the Jews, he was troubled. History and Scripture tell us that when tyrants are troubled by threats to their power, their fear incites suffering that ripples out far beyond their city walls. Bethlehem was a tiny and insignificant village, a dozen miles that might as well have been a thousand from the

cosmopolitan splendor of Herod's palace and seat of power in Jerusalem. Yet it was in Bethlehem, this most unlikely place, to simple parents far from home that Jesus was born--God's Incarnate Son, born to rule and save.

All Jerusalem could feel Herod's fear and wrath, and, for most, that meant keeping their heads down or following Herod's orders. The gifts that God gave in Jesus were salvation, healing, justice, mercy, grace and gratitude. To preserve his earthly power, Herod was willing to kill God's long prophesied gift to the world. Each person around Herod had to choose, in all the complexity of that time, how they would respond both to a tyrant King and the newborn King, who was born to shepherd God's people.

Jesus is God's Epiphany revelation to the whole wide world, not just to Jews or to the people of Judea, a promise of light and love fulfilled in human flesh. The Magi, or wise ones, after all

were foreigners and outsiders to Judea and Judaism. They were, above all else, seekers after knowledge and understanding, willing to leave behind what they knew in search of wider and deeper understanding.

The Magi crossed deserts and wilderness in search of the newborn king. When they found Jesus, they worshipped with joy and presented gifts of honor and prophesy. In their wisdom they rejected Herod's commands to report back. The wise ones were willing to go home by a different and unfamiliar way, to tell others what they had seen and learned of God's gift.

As we approach the close of this tumultuous year, how might we see the light of God's love so that we, like the wise ones, might reject any tyrant's rule? How might we use Epiphany wisdom in light of the sometimes fraught choices we face in our day? This season, may the light of God's love guide you in wisdom, curiosity, exploration, joy and hope.

THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE IS THAT THERE IS HOPE FOR A RUINED HUMANITY--HOPE OF PARDON, HOPE OF PEACE WITH GOD, HOPE OF GLORY--BECAUSE AT THE FATHER'S WILL JESUS BECAME POOR, AND WAS BORN IN A STABLE SO THAT THIRTY YEARS LATER HE MIGHT HANG ON A CROSS. - J.I. PACKER