

INSIDE:

- + **The Christmas Story**
- + **Blue Christmas**



A Publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance
December 2021





ONE is the official publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance (ECMA) which guides its mission, content, and theme. The ECMA encourage submissions from ECMA congregations. Photographs, stories, testimonies, and other submissions should be directed toward your church leaders or sent via email to one@ourecma.com.

Advisory Board
Rob Harvester
Anna Towns

Editor
Linn Ann Huntington
lhunting@fhsu.edu

The ECMA ONE Advisory Board will choose appropriate and timely submissions for publication. The columns in ONE represent the views of the author.

Volume 15, Issue 9 • ourecma.com • Copyright 2021 individual authors and ECMA

Editor's Note:

This month our theme is "The Christmas Story." We have all heard it dozens of times. But in that simple story of a baby being born so long ago lie truths that still resonate today. We also hope you will read the Blue Christmas column about a church service being offered for those who have conflicted feelings about Christmas. May you find peace and joy this Christmas season!

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38 (New Living Translation):

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.

Mary Responded in Obedience; Can We Do Less?

Becky Rogowski
First Presbyterian Church

A baby is coming! We all get this. We've anticipated the arrival of babies. It's all the rage right now to do social media-worthy pregnancy announcements and gender

reveals. They've become major affairs. Professional photographers, parties, social gatherings, going "live" on your favorite platform. Expecting the arrival of a new life is exciting.

Mary was a virgin and engaged to be married when

an angel showed up to tell her she was "God's favored woman" and that she would be giving birth to a son named Jesus. Imagine her shock at this. An angel appears out of nowhere and tells her she is having the most important child

Mary Responded in Obedience (Continued)

ever. This is huge news.

Mary is young. She is unwed. She is still a virgin. We can speculate from the scripture that she was afraid because the angel tells her not to be afraid. This is definitely not the way she was planning her life, I'm sure. The curveball of a lifetime.

Mary at first questions, "How?" The angel explains it all, and she accepts it. Many currently believe they shouldn't question God, but Mary did just that. She asked, "How?" Questions cause us to grow and learn. Questions stretch our minds and hearts and increase our understanding. Questions and the exploration for their answers contribute to our faith, even if the questions themselves may ultimately go unanswered. Mary's questions arose from faith, not doubt. What would your own response to an angel be? Faith? Unbelief?

Without much time passing, Mary goes from shock, to questioning, to complete acceptance. How many of us can say the same when thrown one of life's curveballs? Every time I read Mary's response to the angel's announcement and explanation, I am awed. She replied, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Here is a teenager facing misunderstanding and rejection from her family, her betrothed, and her townspeople. And yet

she agrees. Mary affirms the bedrock truth that undergirds our discipleship: "I am the Lord's servant." After all is said and done, after we have explored all the possibilities, we still must decide: Am I a servant or a master? Is my allegiance to the Lord or to my own desires?"

Sometimes it takes great turmoil in our souls to come to the place of submission, but come to it we must. Even before Jesus was conceived, Mary was faced with the decision: Will I obey and make way for this King? Or, will I take the easy way that avoids difficulty and pain? To her everlasting credit, Mary's response of faith is what our response must be: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

We all get busy with life. We have ways we think we are going to do things--plans we've made for our lives. We like to make our own decisions. Sometimes life throws curveballs. Are they to test us? Are they to challenge us? Are they to stretch us in ways we haven't thought possible? Or are they just annoyances?

It's easy to think we're too busy to say "yes" to things that might push us out of our comfort zones. We might say, "Someone else can do that." We might think, "I've got better things to do."

I entered this fall thinking I was too busy to take on one

more thing. I had a major change at work. I had some health issues. I thought I was getting things back in order--you know, the way "I" wanted them. I'm sure you can relate. Then, a committee I was on needed someone to step up into more of a leadership role. I felt certain this was not for me. I prayed over it and felt completely called to say "yes," even though everything around me told me it probably wasn't the best time to say "yes."

I said yes to coordinating this year's Ellis County Ministerial Alliance's Food Drive in the absence of its past leadership. Logic and reason said it was probably a good idea to let it rest this year, but my heart and soul told me differently. There were so many "God signs" as the food drive came together. I am writing this article as it's taking place, and let me tell you--God is good. It was definitely something that was meant to be a "yes," even though logic was pointing to it being a "no" for me. My heart is full, and I know that the people of Ellis County will benefit from it for months to come.

Think of Mary as a disciple and what her "yes" led to. What might your own "yes" mean?



Becky Rogowski is the Generations in Faith Together Coordinator at Hays First Presbyterian Church.

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-24 (New Living Translation):

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Joseph's Worst Moment Became the Greatest Moment

Rev. Cana Moore

Hays Christian Church

In this passage, we hear a portion of the story of how Jesus was born. Our part focuses on the way Joseph, Mary's husband and Jesus' earthly father, was informed about his role in the story.

The text tells us that Joseph and Mary were to be married, which meant that the deal was as good as done, but then Mary came up pregnant. The text knows that it is by the work of the Holy Spirit, but as far as Joseph was concerned, this was infidelity at its most shameful.

Even in spite of this terrible problem, Joseph was attempting to make the least mess of the disaster that he felt his life had become. In his righteousness, he did not

wish to shame her publicly, as was his legal right. Instead, he wanted to break up with her privately, which would reduce the shame for her in the public eye. It would not reduce the assumptions about him, though, and whether his acceptance of this child-to-be was an admission of participation.

I am sure Joseph felt completely lost. There was no ideal ending for this story, because he now couldn't trust the woman he was to marry, and he knew that Mary would potentially be followed by this for the rest of her life.

Once Joseph found a solution, probably making and remaking up his mind many times, the text tells us that an Angel of the Lord came to him in a dream. This angel spoke to him, telling him that what

Joseph believed to be his greatest disaster was actually a movement of God.

Mary, the angel said, was pregnant not out of disloyalty, but by the Holy Spirit, to bring about a son, named God Saves, who would save people from their sin. This was almost too much to believe, and perhaps in his most quiet moments Joseph, too, had his doubts, but an angel is a hard sign to deny. What Joseph understandably perceived to be his worst moment was instead God offering a chance to participate in the incarnation of God.

The challenge for us, in Joseph's story, is to follow his path in understanding that sometimes in our darkest moments, in what we perceive to be a disaster, God may be working.

Joseph's Worst Moment (Continued)

The hope of Advent is to believe that we are never abandoned by God, that often our worst moment is a place where God is working in us and around us in ways we cannot predict or understand. This means for us there is never a place in our lives, no matter how isolating,

frustrating, shameful, or self-caused, where God is not present and not working.

The wonder of incarnation means that God-with-us is always with us. So when you have a moment where you think all is lost, know that this may be a moment when the

divine is being conceived in your life and cling to that hope.



The Rev. Cana Moore is the pastor of Hays Christian Church

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7 (New Living Translation):

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

That First Christmas Gift Is Still the Most Precious

Rev. Shay Craig

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

St. Michael's Episcopal Church

Once, in royal David's city...

In the passages that precede this one, Luke gives us so much detail, so much to think about. We know exactly what Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, was doing when the angel appeared to him. We know precisely how far along Elizabeth, John's mother, was when Mary went to visit. But here, in these verses where Jesus' actual birth takes place, Luke gives us the

bare minimum. Seven sentences.

Perhaps it is because Luke gives so few details that we are so often and so wonderfully inspired to complete the picture with our own imaginings.

This is a moment we recreate in every possible way. Count the nativity scenes you see over the course of the holidays--or even on your drive home from work. How many varieties are there? Who else is present--the shepherds, the animals, the Magi? We are

fascinated by this tableau, and we have recreated it in myriad ways for centuries.

If this scene were in a movie, it would start with a panoramic view: a capital city, a sumptuous palace, the emperor of all of the Roman Empire in all his perceived power. There would be trumpets, and crowds, and parades.

Then the focus narrows, zooms in, to a small town, an insignificant rooming house, until finally it comes to rest on the stable and this young

That First Christmas Gift (Continued)

couple and their new baby. It's just these three people. In a small room, faintly lit by golden candlelight. Warm, comforting, tranquil, intimate. Just these three people surrounded by their love for one another.

This is, I think, what makes it so magical. This little square of warm candlelight that spills out of the doorway. The peaceful moments where the holy family gaze at one another, treasuring one another. This is a special, sacred space out of time. In a world of chaos and hurry, violence, instability, fear and darkness, there is, in this moment, in these seven sentences, an oasis of... well, love.

Love that this new family has for one another. And love that God has for us. Because in that humble setting, in that quiet, ancient and eternal space, God has loved us all, as well. God has sent God's only son, to be for us an oasis of compassion, mercy, justice and, yes, peace. All of this and more is manifest in that precious moment, in that little square of light, in that little insignificant town, in the country that is very far away.

And they are manifest here in Hays, as well. In our homes and business, in our schools, and churches, and in our hearts. This is the first gift of the first Christmas and still the most precious thing.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

May you find an oasis of warmth and light this Christmas. May you feel the awe and pride that Joseph felt, the contemplative joy that Mary felt, and may you feel treasured by the One who loves you unconditionally, just as you are.

Merry Christmas.



The Rev. Shay Craig is Vicar of St. Andrew's and St. Michael's Episcopal Churches in Hays.

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20 (New Living Translation):

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

Just Like the Shepherds, We Have a Wondrous Story to Share

Cheryl Glassman

St. Nicholas of Myra Catholic Church

One of the best decisions my husband and I made was to move to the country. We have lived in rural Ellis County for over half of our married life (21 of 40 years). Now, don't take me wrong--Hays is a great place to live. However, nothing can compare to the tranquility and peace of a calm summer's night, or a cold night during winter, gazing at an unobstructed view of the moon and stars.

Sunrise and sunset are spectacular too. The air is fresh and clear. One of my favorite things to do is sit outside at dusk with my animals (chickens, a donkey, dog, and cat) and listen to a soft breeze rustle the leaves or pass through the pine trees. I also like spending time walking through our pasture--my husband has cut walking paths. When it gets close to Christmas and the temps are colder, it's great to light a fire, or even just bundle up and enjoy the crisp clean air.

It really does make me think of the shepherds in Luke's gospel. Can you see them? A group of guys, out in

the clear air of night, laughing, but taking seriously the task of caring for their flocks of sheep. Humanity living in peaceful harmony with nature.

On the other hand, they probably weren't very well-kept. I mean, there was no shower, no indoor plumbing out there in the fields. So, of all the people the angel could have appeared to, why shepherds?

Shepherds and sheep appear more than 40 times in the Bible. Hmm... must be a reason. A lot of times, the Bible story doesn't really revolve around them; they just seem like something the author is mentioning, kind of like, when I am driving down I-70 and say, "Oh look, horses!" and then we drive on.

But sheep were important to the people of Jesus' time. They were a valuable source of food and clothing. The shepherds, then, needed to be trustworthy, and it seems God realized the importance of shepherding. If you think about it, many of the great prophets of the Old Testament were shepherds. Name some, you say? How about Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Amos, King

David, and the 12 tribes. They were all unique in their own way, yet all were shepherds.

These men all lived lives close to and appreciated nature and the gifts God bestowed upon them. They also realized that although they were herding sheep, they weren't in control of their own lives. God was. David even wrote one of his most beloved psalms about it--Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

So imagine a group of guys standing in a field talking, watching over the sheep, a soft breeze, and a starlit night. Then, an angel appears to them--and they are afraid. This group of men who guarded sheep and fought off wolves and weather to protect flocks were afraid.

But even fear couldn't stop them from opening their hearts to the wondrous news the angel shared with them. Can you imagine their excitement? Every year when I hear this story I think of what it might have been like. I know how the story touches my heart, so these men must have been

Just Like the Shepherds (Continued)

so overjoyed. And then to be able to run to the stable and see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Then I think of Mary holding her precious son. As the shepherds came to the stable, she must have wondered what was happening. But I believe she saw the peace and joy in their faces. And as the passage says, "Mary kept all these

things in her heart."

The shepherds in the Christmas narrative shared the story with others, and they were believed, I think, because shepherds were respected and trusted.

So what about us? Every year, we hear the words, "Today is born our Savior!" We sing His praises and glorify God. Are we not unlike the

shepherds? We have a wonderful opportunity to take Christ's message of peace, love, and joy to those in need. May the love and peace of Christ dwell in your hearts! Merry Christmas!



Cheryl Glassman is the Minister of Music at St. Nicolas of Myra Catholic Church in Hays.

Blue Christmas Service--Christmas for the Rest of Us

Rev. Shay Craig

Rev. Brenda Roger

One of the most pervasive Christmas images is of a dark night sky, a field of navy blue, broken only by a single star, yellow and gold, so small and yet so powerful against the darkness. This is a perfect image to describe the annual Blue Christmas Service.

For some of us --many of us?--the Christmas holidays are a time when our personal skies are blue. We remember how things used to be, and this year does not measure up. We imagine how the holidays would--or should--be, and this year does not measure up. Christmas season is a time when the world tells us

through Christmas music and songs, social media, and other communications that we should feel jolly, upbeat, and excited for the upcoming holiday festivities. And when we don't, we struggle alone, not realizing that others are experiencing the same emotions and difficulties.

The Blue Christmas Service is the star that shines in that darkness. It's the Christmas service for the rest of us. And there are a lot of us. It's a few minutes away from the happy-clappy Christmas messaging; it's permission to feel what we really feel; it's a vocabulary to think and talk about it.

Blue Christmas Service
6 p.m. Sunday, December 5th
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
2900 Canal Blvd., in Hays

Blue Christmas is a non-denominational service with familiar and peaceful music, scripture, and an opportunity to offer up prayers that are appropriate for what we are really feeling.

For Pastor Brenda Roger of Trinity Lutheran Church, it is a service of remembrance. "The Bible is full of life stories from the mountain top to the valleys, moments of great joy and depths of great sorrow. Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep

Blue Christmas Service (Continued)

with those who weep.

“This will be a service of remembrance or acknowledgement of what burdens you. Space to light a candle in memory of a loved one. There will be scripture readings, reflection, song, and prayer. If you desire at time of individual prayer, we are available to offer this for you. This service is not lengthy and is designed to bring you comfort and hope and to know that there is light amid the darkness.”

The Rev. Shay Craig, the vicar at St. Andrew’s and St. Michael’s Episcopal Churches

in Hays, says, “Just about everyone I know can benefit from this service. There is just a little bit of magic in this service. As many times as I experience it, I always come out feeling comforted, consoled and just a little bit more resilient for the season. You leave with support resources that are available in our community--and cocoa. What could be better than that?”

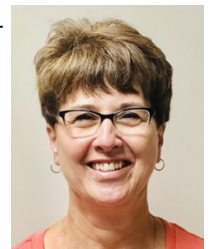
Blue Christmas is a ministry of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church and Trinity Lutheran Church. It will be at 6 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 5, at St. Michael’s

Episcopal Church, 2900 Canal Blvd., Hays. For more information, email Pastor Brenda at Pastor@trinityhays.org or Mother Shay at Rev.Shay.Craig@gmail.com.



The Rev. Shay Craig is Vicar of St. Andrew’s and St. Michael’s Episcopal Churches in Hays.

Rev. Brenda Roger is the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Hays.



“IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONCEIVE HOW DIFFERENT THINGS WOULD HAVE TURNED OUT IF THAT BIRTH HAD NOT HAPPENED WHENEVER, WHEREVER, HOWEVER IT DID ... FOR MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE LIVED SINCE, THE BIRTH OF JESUS MADE POSSIBLE NOT JUST A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING LIFE BUT A NEW WAY OF LIVING IT. IT IS A TRUTH THAT, FOR TWENTY CENTURIES, THERE HAVE BEEN UNTOLD NUMBERS OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO, IN UNTOLD NUMBERS OF WAYS, HAVE BEEN SO GRASPED BY THE CHILD WHO WAS BORN, SO CAUGHT UP IN THE MESSAGE HE TAUGHT AND THE LIFE HE LIVED, THAT THEY HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES PROFOUNDLY CHANGED BY THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.” - FREDERICK BUECHNER

“IF WE COULD CONDENSE ALL THE TRUTHS OF CHRISTMAS INTO ONLY THREE WORDS, THESE WOULD BE THE WORDS: ‘GOD WITH US.’ WE TEND TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION AT CHRISTMAS ON THE INFANCY OF CHRIST. THE GREATER TRUTH OF THE HOLIDAY IS HIS DEITY. MORE ASTONISHING THAN A BABY IN THE MANGER IS THE TRUTH THAT THIS PROMISED BABY IS THE OMNIPOTENT CREATOR OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH!” - JOHN MACARTHUR

