

**Jon Hauerwas – December 24, 2018 – The Christmas Message**  
**Isaiah 9:2,6-7 and Luke 2:1-20**

Luke wants the reader to savor the birth narrative. “Eighty verses in chapter 1 and the child is not yet born. First there must be visions and angels; mothers-to-be must wonder and talk and sing; history must roll to a particular moment when Caesar Augustus will put Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.”<sup>1</sup>

“Mary is betrothed but not yet married. Betrothals, legal and binding, were usually arranged between families when women were quite young, still only girls.”

<sup>2</sup> And now, Mary is pregnant. We are told that the child is not Joseph’s. And, knowing that unfaithfulness was a capital offense in ancient Palestine, we wonder how Joseph will react to Mary’s pregnancy. Will he shout angry words in her presence about how he never loved her? Will he strike her on the face with the clenched fists of the betrayed? Will he haul her before a judge with the intention of annulment and seething for a public execution?

And how will the rest of the community react? Though none of these exchanges find their way into the pages of our Bibles, we can easily imagine the

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

kinds of things that might have been said either to her or about her as a young, unwed mother-to-be.

Chaplain David Keck writes that “someone’s harsh words stick with us with disproportionate power, particularly after a breakup or divorce.” We think “someone who loved me, someone who got to know me, ultimately concluded that I am not worth living with. We remember the nasty criticism and assume the other person must be correct.”<sup>3</sup> Or, alternatively, “if we receive too much boundless praise, we come to think we can do no wrong.”<sup>4</sup> “Learning how to filter what others say – to accept accurate criticism or recognize baseless flattery – requires hard work and the capacity for honest self-reflection. We need the patient strength to sort through our feelings and bring sober judgment to assess what’s accurate and what’s not.”<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this is the notion that most of us are at least somewhat susceptible to shame and a variety of other, external pressures. And, if Mary felt ashamed, then how would she respond? Fearing rejection, would she gather her meager possessions and flee to a distant land without saying a word – leaving Joseph to wonder how his hopes had vanished in an instant?

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<sup>3</sup> David Keck, “Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, December 5, 2018, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Would Mary turn her frustrations inward by cutting at her wrist, intent on taking her last breath on her own terms? Or, would she try, instead, to numb the pain? Would she go searching through unlocked cupboards for a bottle of wine or the remaining, unneeded pills from a prior operation? Would she simply lock herself in her room and resolve to never show her face again in public?

No. Throughout chapters 1 and 2, Mary is portrayed with levelheaded resolve despite her relative youth and the obvious crisis that her pregnancy makes evident. She is presented as one who is favored of God, thoughtful, obedient, believing, worshipful, and devoted to Jewish law and piety.”<sup>6</sup> The announcement of the birth comes not from God or an angel to Joseph, her husband, but to a Mary, a confident, secure, young woman.<sup>7</sup>

The angel, Gabriel, tells Mary that “she will have a son to be named Jesus; the child will be the Son of God and will occupy forever the throne of David; and the birth of the child will accompany the descent of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> In response, “Mary bows in humble obedience to the word of God.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 – 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Joseph also receives word from the angelic messenger, and the couple moves onto Bethlehem, where Jesus is born. “Like all newborns, he is wrapped with strips of cloth to keep the body straight and to ensure proper growth. The guest room was apparently occupied and hence could offer no privacy, so Mary and Joseph had withdrawn to a stable at the back of or underneath the house, perhaps in a cave. A feeding trough served as a crib.”

“Luke has kept the story clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the earth.”<sup>10</sup> “From heaven comes good news of joy and peace occasioned by the birth, not of an emperor, but of him called Savior, Christ, and Lord. And not in palace halls but in the fields, to the poor and lowly, the news comes first.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus “does nothing. He does not miraculously speak, as occasionally is the case in ancient birth narratives of extraordinary persons.” And “he is not rendered more awesome” by exhibiting some unexplainable trait. “The child is here portrayed with great restraint.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 13.

Meanwhile, Mary is deep in thought. The passage tells us that she “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” In doing so, she reminds us of the contemplative, thoughtful dimension of Christian faith. Mary is exhausted, but she exhibits an exquisite unity of thought and feeling when she pauses and ponders.”<sup>13</sup> Whatever has been said about her or to her up to this point simply fades into the distance.

Once back home, Mary reaches into the cupboard and pulls out a large bottle of wine that she has no intention of drinking. What she’s really searching for is the candle in the back recess with the red bow. She’s been saving it for a special occasion. She sets it on a table, lights the flame, and ponders all of these things in her heart.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.