

What a sweet story, that of a poor young woman in love with a less-than-rich carpenter. They were engaged to be married and surely had expectations about their life together. But before they could marry, something big happened: God stepped in and offered a challenge the two young folks never saw coming. A baby. Okay, that's not so tough to imagine, but this pregnancy was not produced by sexual intercourse, or even by in vitro! This pregnancy came about as God acted to fulfill the prophecies that a Savior would be given to save God's people.

Perhaps the strangest thing about this event is Mary's apparent understanding that the baby she was bearing was to bring about a big change in everything! Her understanding was another gift from God. Mary had grown up under the harsh Roman rule of her nation and she probably had not been given an opportunity to have an education. But somehow she knew that through her child God was going to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly; the hungry would be filled and Israel would experience God's mercy and faithfulness to God's people.

Mary's understanding as she expressed it in her song could have gotten her killed, for she was not anticipating a sweet lullabye, but a revolution.

Consider North Korea today. If a young woman dared to offer such a message there as Mary did long ago in her Roman-occupied Israel, the woman would surely be severely punished, perhaps killed outright. Mary's song was a dangerous song sung in a harsh time. The status quo will be no more, because God is here in Immanuel, which means "God with us."

So here we are, in 2015, in the homestretch countdown to Christmas. We're about to celebrate the birth of our Savior, given so long ago as he was born in Bethlehem. But we may find ourselves looking around and wondering, perhaps secretly, whether the birth of Jesus really made that much difference. Today, the rich and powerful seem totally hooked on their riches, and the poor folks keep on getting beaten down. One example: Those who have a lot of money are able to have cheap checking accounts, but those who aren't able to maintain a healthy balance in an account get charged life-defeating fees every month by many banks. And the same goes on in other arenas. The "lowly" haven't seemed to get all that much of a lift.

And too often the church itself falls flat in offering the love of God to others. A story: *A young woman approached the church office tentatively. Christmas music played. She hesitated at the door, then opened it. The office manager looked up, impatient because the year's end was coming and there seemed to be all sorts of complications in several different areas of his work. "Yes? May I help you?" he inquired, as the woman made her way into the office.*

"I'm not sure, but is the pastor here, or someone I can talk to?" the young woman stammered. "Gee, you have arrived at a difficult time. The pastor is away today, and the assistant is busy upstairs with the head of the worship committee. It's almost Christmas, you see, and we're

really busy around this time of year.... Perhaps if you would leave your name and number, I can have someone give you a call later?" She stammered, "That's okay," and hurried out... Anybody who is part of a church knows that things can get hectic during the Christmas season! But sometimes we see what we think we have to do and miss the meaning of the whole thing. The church-worker failed to see or at least to acknowledge the pain of the young woman. He had excuses, but the bottom line of that encounter is that Christ's church failed to reach out with Christ's love. (adapted from a story I heard or read years ago)

These days I cringe as I hear Christians spewing hate towards Muslims. Yes, we are afraid, but NO, we must not turn our backs on homeless, hopeless people because of our fear. We have been called to follow JESUS, not fear or even self-protection. It's too easy to let fear and frenzy stop up our ears so that we cannot hear the call and teachings of Jesus.

How do we gain perspective, a larger vision, about our situations? Years ago I watched a really challenging Christmas Pageant rehearsal. There were lots of children, and they were jumping around and squirming and making a joyful racket. Toward the end of the rehearsal, members of the church's worship committee arrived, wanting to decorate the sanctuary - which was where the pageant rehearsal was taking place. As the minutes passed, I could hear the negative mumbling of some of the worship committee members. One picked up trash in the narthex, uttering his disgust over the pew materials the kids had written all over. Another chased some ten-year-old boys away from scribbling in the church guest book. Another yelled at some kids who were banging one of the sanctuary doors. Their comments went like this: "You know, we used to have really nice pageants, with adults playing the parts..." "I don't know why they let those little kids be in the thing, they can't stand still." "The kids mess things up, not only now, but all throughout the year. Their parents ought to raise them better than that!"

Their irritations were certainly understandable and well-justified. But they were looking at the children and seeing the negatives of having them in church. What they weren't seeing was the absolute blessing that congregation has in just HAVING such a problem!! Imagine, if we had the luxury today of complaining about all the young kids running around here!!! Vision sometimes comes only in retrospect, when appreciation can only be offered for what once was.

Mary saw that something remarkable was happening to her, and she saw that it went way beyond her personally. Her cousin Elizabeth was granted similar scope in vision. God was at work, changing things. Those who were low on the totem pole in society would be lifted up. God was caring the distraught, the poor, those who were oppressed, those whose lives were empty. God was doing great things! (pause)

Today, how large is OUR scope? What do we see about God's work in our midst? We may look around and see our strength diminishing and our burdens increasing. Our vision increases as we appreciate more fully the tenuous positions we have in life, as we witness ourselves and our friends losing abilities, energy, and significant friendships to illness and death. Most of us have been forced to see, perhaps in painful ways, that life on earth doesn't last forever, so perhaps we are able to cherish it more tenderly and to value the hope of God's plan for us beyond death more highly. Our faith grows.

As to our calling as members of Christ's church, we need to check ourselves frequently. Are we too busy, too full of "reasonable" excuses, too full of fear, to offer those who are in trouble or need a safe place? I'll always remember the old story of a visitor to some fancy church who didn't identify himself to anybody, but left a donation with a note attached, "Thank you for a place to cry." Perhaps somebody

needs a place to cry, or a place to gripe, or a place to hear that what we experience in life isn't the whole story, that God is really still alive and well and active among and through us. The world cannot make such a claim; only communities of faith can share such life-giving news.

Our Christian story started long ago with God working in the lives of two women, old Elizabeth and young Mary, who were able to hear and to see something larger than themselves. It continued with a poor, pregnant, tax-burdened couple who needed a place of shelter. They needed a place, and there wasn't much of a place for them. Then they had to flee their country in order to keep their son from being killed by Herod. God was at work – not in a silent, sweet night, but in a harsh, dangerous time.

Our Christian story continues now, as we - who may or may not be low on hope - seek to see beyond ourselves and beyond sweet Christmas carols to the challenges around us and the POWER of our Savior Jesus to lift us all from darkness and despair. We can do this only because of GOD. God is really here, God is working within each one of us even right now, understanding our pain and grief and fear, nudging us to act in ways of love for others that will lead us to a place where we will be fulfilled and filled with peace. THIS is what Christmas is about.

A story, told by a woman named Sandra Brooks in an *Upper Room* years ago: “The day before Christmas Eve was cold, wet, and rainy - dismal. That was an accurate description of my mood as well. With all the hustle and bustle of the season, I felt physically and emotionally depleted.

Our dog, Clementine, a German Weimaraner, had her problems, too. She was old and had a bad case of pelvic arthritis, and the weather was to be unusually cold for South Carolina. My husband said that we should fix Clementine a warm place to lie down, because the cold would cause her a lot of pain.

When we got Clementine's bed ready, we went out to find her. We were startled by what we saw. Overhearing what his daddy has said, our six-year-old son had gone outside, found Clementine, and wrapped his body around her to keep her warm. He loves Clementine. God used our son's loving act to remind me of the reason for celebrating Christmas. Jesus' coming to the world was God's loving response to our need. In turn, our Lord expects us to respond in love to those who need us.” (Found in *A Book of Christmas, 1988*, published by The Upper Room, p. 106)

It's a busy time and a hard time for a lot of people. Everything is intensified during this Christmas season. Grief can be unbearable as memories produce more pain than comfort. Poverty becomes excruciating for those who helplessly or angrily find themselves surrounded by unattainable ads while they feel only defeat. Tempers flare and relationships can be challenged in this season. There is much need around us and among us.

We are in the final few days before Christmas. May God give each of us the vision to see those around us who need a place, those who are aching to be touched or called or listened to; those who yearn to feel that they belong to something and are important to somebody; those who need to believe that God has something good in store, even perhaps after death. May we notice the darkness around a life, and pray and work for the Light of God to shine anew in someone else's eyes. We can have meetings and make plans for our church and give thanks for our blessings. But our FIRST calling is to be part of the story of Jesus: God's love lived out in the very midst of human life. Beyond the sweet songs, may there be faithful living, for me, for you, for us. By the grace of God, this will lead us to never-ending JOY! Amen.