



WONDER

For most of us this Christmas will be different from those of the past. We all have traditions around this beautiful time of year. But as you well know, things are not normal this year. Maybe ... this is actually a *gift* God wants to give each of us this year. A Christmas that is a little different.

Don't get me wrong! All the festivities, the lights, decorations, gifts and special times with family and friends aren't distractions. Well, they *can* be. But all those twinkling lights, adorned trees, wrapped packages, the anticipation, secret preparations, joyful and heartfelt songs are the fruit of Jesus' birth. All that joy and beauty that we love are the winsome things that overflow from his birth into our cosmos. Something I often wonder about is what our world would be like without the birth of Jesus. We would be without his holy Mother, the churches, the saints, the art, architecture and music that portray and celebrate him. If all that "were not" what would our world

be like? It makes my heart sink and gives me the chills because it would be very bleak.

There would be art, there would be architecture and song. We know that from archeology, world history and the history of religions. But take Christ out of this world's reality. Take the Incarnation out of it and that would mean there would not be a crèche, a Madonna with a babe in her arms, a God who wanted us to love him so much that he took on all we are, from conception to a heartbreaking death. There wouldn't be an account of angels speaking to shepherds, of wise men from the East following a great star. We would not have Mary with her simple motherhood, and Joseph and his noble and selfless being would not be part of our world. The apostles with their courage and earthy bumbling humanity would not be part of our common understanding of man and the divine. I could go on and on: through the churches, mosaics, carvings, Gregorian chant, but it would put both of us into a sad state.

But, just maybe this year, because we can't go to those crowded malls, Christmas festivals, and other places overflowing with humanity – maybe we can wonder at the marvel, the unthinkable reality that slipped into our world two thousand years ago.

Only two of the Evangelists write about Jesus' birth. Both include genealogies that, of course, differ from one another. But they have the same heart: David, the King. Both Mary and Joseph were from that royal line of David. Matthew's

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genealogy ends with “... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ” (Mt 1:16). Scholars have written rooms full on books on this chapter. But for the sake of our wondering we’ll put that aside for now. It is obvious that God wanted us to know *clearly* that Jesus was the son, promised to David, who would reign forever.

What God’s plan was to redeem us, to mend what was broken, is not anything we could have dreamed of. Yet, here we are. God, himself, the Second Person of the Triune God, not only came to us but actually became truly one of us. This seems to have been a great joy to Jesus. His favorite way of referring to himself was, “Son of man.” It is used sixty-nine times in the gospels! This amazing reality – that he, the Son of God, became incarnate, enfleshed and was “the Son of man!” - could we have dreamt that up? No.

That mystery, that reality, needed to be announced to our world. How did God do this? In past events of salvation history, there were flaming, flashing swords with cherubim at the gates of Eden; all the earth was submerged beneath the floating ark; thunder, lightning, fire and smoke engulfed Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the commandments, and other mind-boggling extravaganzas of nature that he used to get our attention.

Luke tells us what happened. “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ... The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in

the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” (Lk 2:9-12) Lone shepherds out in a field at night? Why? A city would have more people to witness, more to hear, more to go and see. That isn’t the way God worked. Yet this news was “for all the people.” So much to wonder about.

That one angel was joined “suddenly” by a multitude of the heavenly host, an army, a huge number, “praising God and saying,



‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth goodwill among people” (Lk2:13-14). *This* is the big bang, the aurora borealis, the flaming and flashing of God’s message! Still - to so few. Ah, another bit to marvel about.

In an almost prosaic tone Luke says, “the angels had left them and gone into heaven” as if this happens every day. Gone into heaven! Oh that starry night! Those shepherds didn’t waste any time – they said to one another, “Let us go NOW ... to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (Lk2:15). The angel didn’t need to tell them *who* sent the message. Their souls knew, like John the apostle knew, that it “was the Lord,” as they were fishing after Jesus’ death. So, the shepherds just got up and ran to find that “child laying in a manger.” We don’t know if that was a long run or short. But they didn’t

wait till dawn. They made haste, as scripture says. The beautiful thing is that they believed enough to take that risk and see. And, oh they did see!

What did they see? They “found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:16-19). They found all as the an-

gel had said. They were welcomed into the space where this young couple had barely settled in for their baby to be born. What great hearts Mary and Joseph had that they allowed them near. They listened to the shepherds’ story. And here is the glorious thing: “All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.” All – Mary and Joseph most of all “were

amazed.” So much to wonder about. Mary and Joseph knew that this infant of theirs was a very special child. They had had heavenly visitations months before. Those memories were stored in their own hearts and souls. But to have that secret now spoken of by these shepherds, in the middle of the night? Mary and Joseph “treasured all these words and pondered them.”

So, sit now, let the light shine on you from the lantern, the little fire provided by Joseph in that cave. Let the light stream down on you from that brilliant star flickering its secret in the heavens. And very specially let the radiance from the face of this baby shine on you. Jesus encompasses the infinite Love of God for us. Why would the almighty, all powerful God choose such a way to show us his love? Yes, for us. Oh, sit back and wonder. MMEK

Illumination: The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.291, fol. 32r. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), 1907.

Sr Martha Gagnon makes Simple Vows August 13th, 2020



"But how can this be?" (Luke 1:34).

Mary's response of amazement, befuddlement, incredulity, to the angel Gabriel resonated in my heart and echoed in my ears as the new direction that my life was taking became clear. (Though my terms had a decidedly 21st century flavor: "No way, couldn't be me! I'm too old... I'm too implacable... You gotta be kiddin'!... You are kidding, right?... Not kidding? Wow. Well, OK then!") So began the journey that led to my profession to Christ this past August.

Standing before the altar, with arms raised and tears of joy rolling down my cheeks, I sang the *Suscipe*—begging the Lord, "Receive me." I professed, before God, my brothers and sisters, and a small gathering of friends, my simple vows as a Benedictine nun.



On the eve of these first vows, the black veil which I now wear was blessed. The ceremony includes these words: "...sanctify this veil, which your servant desires to wear as a sign of her monastic profession. By this all may know that she has been set apart from other women to be dedicated to your service."

How can this be?! How could this be my veil; how could it be that (thanks be

to God!) I am taking this step? Because God put the desire in my heart; because he set me apart, nurtured my love, enkindled my hope; because God is infinitely merciful and infinitely patient.

Like the parable of the barren fig tree in Luke's Gospel (Lk 16:6-9), the vine-dresser begs the vineyard owner to leave the fruitless tree standing one more year. "I will hoe around it and fertilize it. It may yet bear fruit." Responding to God takes being open-hearted, and open-eared, (and sometimes, being open to being considered a bit crazy, by worldly standards) in order to pursue that

thing you 'just have to do'—that thing that brings your heart joy. Whether that vocation is parent, nurse, artist, or contemplative monastic, Jesus knows



when you are ready in disposition to attend to his call. It's all done in God's good time – and not a moment sooner! He tends and prunes; only then are we able to "listen with the ear of our heart," to find our true vocation; only then do we bear fruit.

In the "Mirror of Eternal Blessedness," the 14th century mystic, John Ruysbroeck, writes: "The Holy Spirit reveals his grace in a person's heart. If a person wishes to accept ... he opens his heart and will to God" Our response is from our free will; but the seed was created by the Father, planted by the Holy Spirit, and tended by the Son. Ruysbroeck continues: "There is in addi-

tion a love which is between you and God. This love is a holy desire which rises up to God's glory, accompanied by thanksgiving, praise, and all the exercises of love."

My desiring to wear the veil, proclaiming aloud my vows of obedience, stability, and *conversatio morum*, and the signing of my vow chart on the altar



are indicative of my promise to be solely dedicated to God's service and my yearning to cooperate with God's will. "Prefer nothing to Christ" is the kernel at the center of the Rule of Benedict and is the objective of each of the Benedictine vows. And now, it is the animating guide for my life. It is with great joy in my heart that I will put into practice those exercises of love: praising God, seeking God, and giving thanks through living the vows I have made.

Actually, it seems God prefers to unfold his plans in unexpected ways. Like bringing a hopeless tree back to life, like smiling down as a 55-year-old professes simple vows as a Benedictine, ... or like bringing salvation to the world through his incarnation as a babe born of a virgin.

"But how can this be?" Only by God's grace and love, which make all things possible. Amazing, isn't it?! Please pray for me; I am praying for you. SMG





HAPPENINGS

August 31. Sr. Mechtilde broke her leg. They had to send for a second ambulance, as the first one had a swarm of bees inside! She had surgery the day after and is doing well.



September 8. The feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and for us a solemnity. It's the anniversary of the first group of us taking vows as Benedictines, and our foundation day, as well as the brothers' patronal feast.



September 18. Sr. Maria Isabel had knee surgery and has recovered well.

September 23. Mother and Sr. Mary Angela received word that their sister Mary, who had been ill with cancer, had taken a turn for the worse. They flew home to Chicago and were with her when she died the next day. On October 6 they returned home to quarantine until they tested negative for COVID-19.



October 17-25. Our annual community retreat. Because of the pandemic we didn't have an outside speaker, but listened to taped conferences.

November 2. All Souls' Day. In addition to the three Masses, both communities processed as usual to the

cemetery for prayers for the deceased members of our communities and the blessing of the graves.



November 25. At long last we were connected to Petersham's broadband project. Sr. Gemma put long hours into forwarding the project and Sr. Mechtilde did the final setup.



May we be in this world a ray of that LIGHT which shone from Bethlehem, bringing joy and peace to the hearts of all men and women.

Pope Francis

Dear Friends,

Christmas 2020

The year has zoomed by here in Petersham but that never means we haven't had you and your intentions in our daily prayers here. The news keeps us keen to be at prayer asking God to do what humans can't without a big boost of grace and sacrifice for others. That is what God has done for us. Jesus "emptied himself" to come among us to bring us back to the Father and full and eternal life! He became, oh so small bodily and in the eyes of the world - for us, all for us to be like him. Something beyond our dreams!

We can not thank you enough for the support that you give us in your prayers and material too. We could not do this without you! God knows and sees you when we are praying the Divine Office. Our Christmas Gift to you is a novena as nine Masses during this Christmastide! Blessed Holy Christmas and every blessing in the New Year!

All here at St Scholastica Priory




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Continued from page 6 will be buried in on the day of her funeral, which she hopes will be transformed at the Resurrection into a shining heavenly one. It has been said that as one lives, so shall one die; so also the nun hopes that as she dies in the cowl, so may she live to sing the Lord's eternal praises.

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CLOTH THAT WEAVES OUR LIVES

It all began at the Army Navy Surplus Store thirty-six years ago. The sisters were in need of fabric, and the retailer had a nearly indestructible, industrial-strength cloth that could be easily dyed black for a good price. And so the deal was made. Several huge bolts of material were brought back to the monastery and nine cowls were sewn in preparation for the first solemn professions of the original founding members on September 8, 1984. This was the beginning of a story that is still in the making today-- one cloth weaving lives together through time and space.

"It's just cloth," one might say. And yet it is cloth that holds a unique bonding power to the spiritual world, as with the relics of the Saints or the Shroud of Turin. The Catholic Church reveals the brilliance of the Incarnation through this meeting of spirituality and materiality. And even in the day-to-day of the sisters' lives, these cowls have special significance.

Every day, the sisters engage in spiritual battle, "not with flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of

this age and evil spiritual forces in the heavenly realm" (Eph 6:12). Just as soldiers have uniforms and armor, so also do consecrated religious have their own "coat of mail". The cowls at St. Scholastica Priory are heavy

indeed; each garment weighs several pounds and is donned when praying the Divine Office several times a day. Each morning they stand in order, sign the cross on their lips and say, "O Lord, open my lips; and my mouth shall announce your praise (Ps 51:16). The cowls have literal "gravitas"-- a physical gravity, to be sure--which serves as a reminder of the gravity of this service of prayer to the King of Kings. When each sister envelops herself with her cowl and feels its physical weight, she knows it is for good reason.

"It helps me to pray," observed one sister. For our newest permanent member, consecrated this past June, the value and solemnity of the cowl is still on the forefront of her mind. It is this official robe received at solemn profession that

sets her off on mission, and it will be with her until death. It is part of the "identifying garb" that reflects her role in the Church and the priority of her heart. And it is the garment in which she

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