

Advent Joy: The First to Know

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

www.knollwood.org

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Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; Luke 1:46b-55

During the children's sermon one Christmas, the pastor gathered the little ones down front around a large nativity. In telling the Christmas story, he explained how the shepherds were the first to hear about the birth of Jesus. Summing up, the pastor asked, "So who was the first to know Jesus was born?"

There was a heartbeat of silence. Then a little girl timidly answered, "*Mary?*"

Yes, Mary was the first to know. And not just when Jesus was born, but months before, when an angel came calling and told her God was planting a miracle in her womb.

And first to know when that first touch of morning sickness sent a shudder through her body, even though she had never been with a man.

And first to know as the end of the first trimester ended and Mary saw the hint of a bulge just beneath her belly.

Is it possible for us, like Mary, to feel a certainty growing within us that Christmas really is coming? Not the festive, frantic holiday, but the deeper conviction of the divine reversal about which Mary sings: that in the gift of Jesus, God is righting all that is wrong with the world and giving birth to all that is kind and just and good. For "the Lord has brought down the powerful . . . and lifted up the lowly."

This kind of Christmas sneaks up on us slowly, like a tiny flurry of cells that unite and meld and dance and sing until a new life forms within the hiddenness of a mother's womb. The church calls this slowness, this hiddenness, this pregnant waiting, "Advent" or even just, "Faith.

The other day, I stopped by Dunkin Donuts for a cup of coffee and a quick email check. As I sat there sipping my java, I complimented the hostess on the wonderful Christmas carols being piped through the sound system. Nodding at the big screen mounted on the wall, I said, "It's nice to hear that beautiful music, instead of what is usually blaring through that TV."

"Yeah," she said. "I wish we could ban TV for one month each year at Christmas. Then we could really enjoy the season and maybe even . . . *believe*."

Yes, Mary's song--and the Bible's story of Christmas--feels out of sync with the real world in which we live. Indeed, the pink candle on the Advent wreath this day says as much. The color pink stands defiantly amid the cooler hues of purple--the purple of cold and dark and winter--to signify a tremor of joy is stirring within us. We find ourselves wanting to sing with Mary, "My soul *magnifies* the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

In the Bible, magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God's goodness and strength go together. As the psalmist sings, "O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt God's name together!"

To *magnify* is to make big. And by learning to focus more on what God is doing, and less on those 24/7 news feeds that drive us to distraction, hope has a chance to gain a foothold within us like a newly fertilized egg, clinging to a uterine wall.

Our friends at *Baptist News Global* introduced me to Walter Ashby. Walter grew up in west Texas with a severe sight impairment. Walter's vision is 20/1000, meaning he has to be 20 feet away from something most of us can see clearly from three football fields away. But due to a strong faith, a resilient spirit, and the evolution of technology for magnifying text, Walter distinguished himself in the fields of urban planning, banking, and asset management.

Now, in his new book, *Impaired, But Empowered*, Walter argues that the sight impaired are some of the most creative people among us. Why? Because they constantly have to envision new ways to negotiate hazards and hurdles most of us never notice.

“Every time you encounter someone in the hall, on the sidewalk, or entering a room,” he writes, “you are forced to gather data and form a hypothesis as to that person’s identity. Every step, every voice, every glimpse or sound causes your mind to speculate. Not only has this phenomenon honed my intellectual skills; it has shaped my soul.”

Similarly, Mary’s imaginative capacity was shaped by *magnifying* the lord. In magnifying the Lord, she saw the world not just as it is, but as it can be and will be when God’s will is finally “done on earth as it is in heaven.” Such a divinely-honed imagination for her, as for us, is not an exercise in positive thinking. No, this imaginative capacity arose as she carefully *pondered* God’s word to her and heeded the divine nudges shaping her journey.

Luke tells us no fewer than three times that “Mary *pondered* these things in her heart.” Meanwhile, Paul says we keep the eyes of faith open wide by “rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances,” which basically amounts to, “Pay attention to what God is doing in your life and in the world.”

Some of us grew up--or *are growing up*--with the tradition of an Advent calendar. An Advent calendar is a large, colorful page that depicts some scene from the Christmas drama: the shepherds staring slack-jawed into the night, the three wise men bouncing on camel’s backs to Bethlehem, or Mary and Joseph oohing and aahing over the baby Jesus in the manger.

This larger scene is dotted by 25 little shuttered windows that mark the December days of Advent leading to Christmas. Each day, as the world about us waits impatiently for Santa Claus, the child in the house--or the child *in us*--opens the little window for that day, gingerly, hopefully, to see a Bible verse or picture that reveals what *God* is doing. And thus we learn day

by day, step by step, that the coming of the Christ child requires from us, as from Mary, tender, expectant waiting.

Where do you find yourself wanting to believe, starting to believe this Christmas? In a startling hope that showed up to challenge your despair? I saw such a miracle unfold last Wednesday night at our church's Service of Remembrance. Bereaved folk gathered around a small table in a darkened sanctuary, each holding a candle in a trembling hand signifying a loved one lost.

And yet in the candle light flickering on their faces--and glistening in their tears--I saw a defiant hope starting to shine.

Where do you find yourself wanting to believe, starting to believe this Christmas? In that icy bitterness that like a snowman, held on long after the rest of the snow was gone, but is finally beginning to melt? No, you're not ready to give a happy Christmas hug to that person who hurt and betrayed you. But you're beginning to see that because of Jesus, it's not going to be possible to hate them forever.

Where do you find yourself wanting to believe, starting to believe this Christmas? For me, one place was at a recent breakfast in support of the Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministry, a ministry led by Knollwood's own Rodney Stilwell. There, amid my despair over living in a nation with the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world, I heard about inmates getting the encouragement and empowerment they need to start over.

Of the 21 inmates released from prison after completing the Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministry's new *Transition to Work* program, not one has committed a crime. And of the 155 men who left prison after completing *The 7 Habits on the Inside* program, only five have been re-incarcerated. Compare that to the national average where 66% of inmates will re-offend within three years for want of the skills and support needed to succeed.

Thanks to the work of the Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministry, Isaiah's ancient prophecy about the prisoners going free is actually proving true. In fact, I now have a "Your Life Matters" pottery tile hanging from the radio knob in my car, one of 600 such tiles made by inmates. And all 600 of those tiles were fired in Knollwood's own pottery kiln in the Wellness and Community Center.

Now my little tile, my Advent calendar, and seeing courageous folk forge a new life, against all odds, are helping me believe that maybe Mary's song is not religious fiction, but God's own truth. For while Mary was the first to know everything can and will change, because of Jesus, thank God, she was not the last!

In her essay, "How Far to Bethlehem," Anita Wheatcroft tells a story from her childhood. As a little girl, she moved to New York City, leaving friends and grandparents behind. Heartsick and homesick, she didn't know what to do.

Then one magical night, she was seated in the back of a church, new and unfamiliar to her. In the hushed darkness, she watched as the candles were lit. Then the spots came up and a colorful procession of bearded wise men and earnest shepherds made their way down the aisle. They were headed toward a magnificent manger scene at the altar.

The organ music swelled and little Anita was transported to another place and time. Before her parents could stop her, she slipped from her seat and began following the wise men and shepherds. Her wide-eyed wandering down that aisle was a kind of homecoming.

"When I reached the manger scene," Wheatcroft writes, "there were a sleepy donkey, real sheep, and Mary and Joseph beneath an angel with outstretched wings. Above all, there was a light in the manger, enfolding us in its glow. Kneeling in front of it, I had a sense of exaltation, of self-offering as real as any I have ever known since. This was real to me, and I was there."

"Of course, it didn't last long. I was lifted to my feet by an usher and carried down the aisle, back to my embarrassed family, and the pageant swept on. I was vaguely aware of subdued smiles, and my parents' whispered scolding didn't matter. My discovery was my own, and I had something now that no one could ever take from me. I had been to Bethlehem. I had seen it all for the first time and I would never forget."

This morning, you are invited to make your own way down the aisle to receive Communion. You are invited near this altar, sanctified by another's tears, and near this wreath, with its defiant pink candle burning bright, and near the empty crèche, awaiting the birth of the Christ child.

Maybe here, as you take the bread and cup you'll feel a flutter of wild joy from someplace deep inside . . . as the revolution Mary sang about and Jesus started, takes hold in you.

O Holy Christ, help us ponder and magnify and pray and sing until the truth of Mary's song--and the depth of Mary's joy--takes root in us. Amen.

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