

January 1, 2012 Year B
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A STABLE MEDITATION

It began with the angel Gabriel; for Mary struck the angel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You must not be afraid," he told Mary,.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice, that beneath those great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear, to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a young girl.

"But Mary kept all these things reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)

And it continued through the birth of her son.

If you were to consult a good book on meditation, or consult a spiritual director on how to meditate, you would not be advised to seek out a barn, heated only by the warmth of cattle and donkeys. You would not be told to seek out a busy place, filled with shepherds and flocks of sheep coming and going – let alone magi with rare and expensive gifts. Most likely you would be told to seek out a place of quiet where you could reflect peacefully and fairly comfortable.

Yet, on this feast of the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, we find Mary, the great ponderer who, on the basis of this text, is meditating in the silence of her heart what had to have been the busiest stable in Palestine. So what is the meaning of this strange scene?

It is safe to say that the account Luke gives us is not intended to teach us about meditation techniques. Rather, this scene may suggest to us that if the meaning of the Christmas miracle is to be prolonged, it has to happen in our heart and in the everyday circumstances of our lives.

Had any of us been consulted to create the setting for the birth of God's son, we likely would have done things quite differently. We might have created a quiet, peaceful setting, a warm comfortable place with just the right lighting and smells. But Luke is telling us that God comes into our lives, is born into our hearts, in the midst of our busy, sometimes confused lives. Our hearts are often like that crowded stable – a work in progress – but it is here that God chooses to be born, day after day after day. And, what is most important: we can find God there, if we truly try.

The great feast of Christmas we just celebrated last week gave us the ideal opportunity to reflect in our hearts the mystery of Jesus coming to us as a baby. Our Christmas liturgy draws us into the mystery of that time long ago, a fleeting time because soon we will move back into Ordinary Time. Yet it is in the ordinary flow of our lives, filled with the smells and noises, the deadlines and the demands, that crowds

the stables of our hearts, like the Bethlehem cattle and donkeys, that we must discover and prolong the meaning of Christmas. It is in the daily extending of hospitality to all the unexpected shepherds that show up in our lives that the mystery of the incarnation is lived and understood just a little better; all the good things and the bad, the things that make us sad and the things that cause us to glorify and praise our God; all the unexpected, unwashed shepherds of life that we, like Mary, can reflect upon; all of these can be a means to realize the truth that our God is truly with us.

And what did Mary reflect on in that busy stable? Our imagination suggests many things: the message of the shepherds, the ordinariness of her circumstances, and the dazzling visit with angels. But we must remember that Mary was a deeply religious woman steeped in Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps what Mary pondered was the blessing we heard in the first reading. Perhaps she saw that the words God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses were now being spoken to all people:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (Num 6:24-26)

Perhaps, in this tiny child lying in the manger, Mary saw all of that. For is that not what we see? In the tiny face of this vulnerable infant, that the face of God shines upon each of us. Through the eyes of this child God looks kindly upon each of us, and we experience true peace.

Mary's pondering did not end that day in the crowded stable at Bethlehem. Like any good mother, thoughts of her son must have preoccupied her mind all her life. The Scriptures tell us that she pondered the meaning of her son's words when, after three days missing he was found in the Temple. She struggled to understand his public ministry and she anguished at the cross pondering the mystery of his death.

So like Mary, we must ponder in our hearts during this Christmas season as well. The following statement is anonymous but it seems good to reflect on this in light of today's readings.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpentry shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book.

He never held an office.

He never owned a home.

He never had a family.

He never went to college.

He never traveled more than two hundred miles from that place where he was born.

He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, his cloak. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the kindness of a friend.

Over twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is still the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind' progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that have ever reigned, all put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as much as that One Solitary Life.

Today, the Church tells us that Mary's work, as a mother, goes on, for now she reflects on her son present in his Church on earth. A story is told of a teacher who said that he was going to write the word "church" on the blackboard. He then printed "ch..ch." The students told him he left out two letters in the center of the word: "ur." The teacher responded, "You are correct. 'You are' the heart and center of the church." Yes, we are at the heart of the church because God has loved us unconditionally. For here lies the very practical side of today's message. Do we see with the eyes of the heart? For the language of the heart is frequently a language of silence. We like Mary must be faithful, humble companions who point others toward Christ.

So Mary, continues to pray for Christ's Church here on earth, to intercede that the blessing pronounced by Moses might be more fully realized and lived. Mary shares with us the fruits of her own reflection. So that every time we hear the sound of rosary beads or words from a familiar hymn – Ave Maria, Hail Holy Queen – or pray, with a favorite Marian icon or statue, we are reminded that Mary, the Mother of God, is with us in the Church. She reminds us that throughout history her son is the source of our blessing.

As we ponder in the busy, crowded stables of our hearts the birth of Christ let us turn to Mary, the Mother of God, as she continues to reflect with us on the great blessing God has given us in this Christmas season.

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift us his countenance upon you, and give you his peace. (Num 6:24-26)