

## The Christmas Stranger

[Luke 2:15-20](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Lately I've heard a lot of people say, "I'm having a hard time getting into the Christmas spirit this year." But the Bible doesn't really care much about that. Instead, it asks us if we are attending to the Spirit of Christmas who gets into us.

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I love children's Christmas pageants. I just love them. Last week our school presented a beautiful one, and tomorrow night the children's ministry of the church will present its annual pageant. You've all been to them. You know the story, and you know exactly what is going to happen. Well, actually with kids you never know what will happen, but you do know what is supposed to happen. And you know all the characters.

There are the beautiful cherubs, dressed in white with gold tinsel halos, who announce, "Good news of great joy for all the people." Cowering in front of them are the shepherds, always in drab colored robes, who are dragging around the kids dressed as sheep. They are supposed to look surprised by the angels. The real character role in the pageant always goes to Herod, who is supposed to look as despicable and scary as possible as he speaks to the three kings. By the way, they get the best robes of anyone in the pageant. Joseph always seems beside the point in these pageants, because he doesn't have much to do except look pathetic when he talks to the innkeeper who always turns him away.

The role of Mary is the hardest to pull off. She is supposed to be presented as the peaceful, but almost ambivalent, mother of our Lord. And yet as hard as that is to portray, our little girls always seem to capture these feelings. Last Wednesday at the school pageant, I saw a six-year-old Mary walk onstage with Joseph, drop her baby into the manger, and then smile so beatifically at the audience. That little girl was wearing the same serene face you see on all the masterpiece paintings of the Madonna and child. We all know that face.

What is behind that quiet, melancholy demeanor? Luke, the author of this story, has made it clear that something unique is going on with Mary. She seems out of step from the rest of the characters, and her private, perhaps even lonely, journey through Christmas is exactly the reason we are drawn to her. That's why we know that face so well.

When the shepherds arrived breathlessly at the manger, they began speaking about the angels and the heavenly host they heard praising God. They also relayed the news that they had heard about this child being the long-awaited "Messiah the Lord." In verse eighteen we are told that all who heard them were amazed at what the shepherds told them. In verse twenty we're told that the shepherds then returned glorifying and praising God. Between these phrases describing amazement and praise is sandwiched verse nineteen. That's Mary's verse. She isn't amazed, and she isn't glorifying and praising God. We are told, "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Isn't that striking? Everybody else is saying, "Glory hallelujah," but Mary is having a hard time getting into the Christmas spirit. She is the one closest to the miracle, and yet she is more a stranger to it than the shepherds. The best she can do is treasure and ponder their words about him being "the Messiah the Lord."

The word that has been translated as "treasure" in the Greek has the connotation of holding close out of concern. The word translated as "ponder" has the connotation of meditating upon or conversing with. So Mary is taking all this to heart where she converses with something ponderous and strange she does not

understand.

Maybe this Christmas it is easier for you to relate to Mary's pondering than to the shepherds elation. Just last week the fires finally went out under the rubble of the twin towers in New York. Thousands of families are having their first Christmas without the loved ones who died there, in the Pentagon, and the hijacked airplanes. The leaders of those who are waging this war of terror against the West are still on the loose. Some of you still have not been able to return to offices that are plagued with anthrax spores. And the economy isn't exactly doing back flips.

When you add to these national concerns the personal concerns of jobs and relationships that are vaguely dissatisfying, or health that feels like it is slipping away, it is hard to make sense of the shepherds running away from the manger shouting joy to the world. Maybe you too feel like a stranger who has stumbled into a Christmas party. Maybe you even suffer from a little shepherd envy as you admit, "I wish I felt what they felt. I don't see or hear any angels. I just can't seem to get inside the Christmas story this year."

You don't have to get inside it. As Mary will tell you, it is the story that gets inside of you.

The late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has written that Mary's heart was penetrated by a revelation that was unclear. Right. The Christmas story is both penetrating and unclear. This means that there is more to the gift you are receiving this year than you understand. So all you can do is just start a conversation with all the hope that it promises. Don't rush to interpret Christmas, because it takes some time for the hope to mature.

When my daughter was a very little girl, my stepfather began a practice of giving her a savings bond every Christmas. When she was six years old those pieces of paper didn't mean as much as the new doll. So we just kept them in a safe place for a while. But when she went to college, she was awfully thankful that both she and the bonds had matured. It takes time to realize the value of what you have received.

As every child in the Christmas pageants knows, we are just celebrating the birth of our hope tomorrow night. If you don't understand how all of this is leading to peace in your troubled heart, let alone peace on earth, just take the promise to heart. Like Mary you will eventually find that hope begins to make sense. Eventually.

As the Gospel of Luke continues after the birth of Jesus, the next time we meet Mary, Joseph, and their son, Jesus is twelve years old. His parents thought he was lost but have just found him teaching the elders of the temple in Jerusalem. When his mother started to scold him, Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" Then we are told, "Mary treasured all these things in her heart." There it is again. The great internal conversation with what God did twelve years before continues.

According to all four gospels, when Jesus began his ministry thirty years after his birth, apparently no one knew about his miraculous birth. The "Glory Alleluias" of the shepherds were not passed down. No one seemed to know about that. This is the way of the ecstatic form of religions that only last for a short while. But Mary, and her pondering heart, were still a persevering part of the story. She is the only link between the baby and the man. She and the growing conviction within her that something was happening to her son -- something that began with his miraculous birth.

Within Luke's Gospel we find this wonderful subplot of what is happening to Mary as her son matures and begins to assume his messianic role. Then in the second volume of his writing, the Book of Acts, Luke makes a point of placing Mary in the upper room with the other disciples where they are waiting and praying as Jesus told them to do. So when the Holy Spirit came with the power of a rushing wind at Pentecost Mary was there. She was listening when, filled with the Spirit, Peter began to preach calling Jesus, "the Messiah, the Lord." Those were the very words the angels used when they spoke to the shepherds.

Now Mary understands. Now the hope has matured. And now she has what the shepherds had thirty-three years earlier. For her the hope came not in a moment, but over the course of a lifetime that is finally understood.

Last week, in addition to going to Christmas pageants, I also had the privilege of joining my pastoral colleagues in taking communion to our older members who are shut-ins. Every time I do that I get hopelessly behind in the schedule, because I cannot tear myself away from the stories they tell. It took me a while to understand this, but in telling these great stories they are interpreting their lives. They are understanding the hope that has matured over the years. It is like listening to Mary after Pentecost as they say to their pastor, "Now I get it."

That's how the story ends. Christmas is about the beginning of your hope. To receive this hope you have to take your own place in the pageant this year. If it is a wonderful time for you, then you find that the shepherds have already written your lines. Your role is just to rejoice and then go home glorifying and praising God. But if the message of Christmas seems strange to what you are feeling this year, then settle into Mary's role. If that's your part, if pondering is what makes the most sense to you, then it is enough for now to know that you belong in the story.

You are not a stranger to this holy drama. The stranger is the hope that has been born into your life.

You don't have to understand this hope, and you don't even have to feel hopeful. All you have to do is take the stranger in.

The fulfillment of your hope, O God, is more than we can handle. So all we ask is that the hope be reborn in our hearts, that the sacred conversation may shape our lives until we understand. Amen.