

“WHAT CHILD IS THIS?”
The Rev. J. Cooper Conway, Priest-in-Charge

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

What mother looking at her infant child doesn’t wonder at some point, “What does life hold in store for this little person?” And what do mothers usually wish for their beautiful babies? Health, safety, security, happiness? All of these, I would guess. But as we consider Mary and her infant boy, we realize that her hopes and wonderings had to be very different from the average mom because she was called to a very different reality.

Not only had Jesus been conceived through the declaration of an angel but also now as shepherds gathered around the child, they told her that angels had declared to them “unto you is born on this day, a Savior.” The message? Jesus, her son, did not belong to her...rather he was a gift of freedom to all the people of Israel and beyond.

Has Mary not known this before? Had the angel not told her that her child would be “the successor to King David” and the “son of the Most High”? Yes, she had been told and in fact she had understood that God was doing something new here: scattering the proud, lifting up the lowly...But still, hearing that the angels had declared Jesus was born to the shepherds as a gift, a Savior: **that** had to hit home. Her child was not her own! So we are told that when Mary heard the shepherds’ words, she had to ponder them in her heart; she had to process.

And it came to pass that what the angels said was true. According to Luke, only eight days after his birth when Mary and Joseph took their child to the temple in Jerusalem “to present him to the Lord”, he was recognized by the aged and devout Simeon, who called Jesus “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” It was becoming clear that Jesus was not a child for whom a mother could hold small, warm, and tame ambitions like health and happiness...Mary had to stretch herself.

And as Mary’s child grew—Luke tells us that he became “strong and wise”—until at twelve he separated himself from his parents to stay in Jerusalem at the end of their annual trip there. And why? To remain at the temple: “in His father’s house.” Now his parents may not have understood this. But Mary treasured this episode as her ambitions for Jesus were stretched and changed (and still so early in his life!)

It had to feel like a test.

You know, many of us—parents, teachers, mentors—have experienced similar transformations, a similar letting go process. If you are a parent, you might cast your mind back to the first day of school for that first child. Remember standing there, holding your little one’s hand until it was time to them to get on the bus or enter the schoolroom door? Your child may have been hesitant (or not!), but for you...would “anxiety” be the right word? Anyway, I guess what I am saying is that each child is a gift to the world and Jesus was no different. In fact, Jesus, the Son of God, is the world’s first great gift from and of God. “Eternally begotten of the Father.” “Of one being with the Father.”

But also, Jesus is Mary’s gift—he is the one who became “incarnate from the Virgin Mary.”

So today we celebrate his birth. We remember the sacrifices, human and divine, which brought us Jesus the Christ. And we pray for generosity of spirit that we too may become and offer living gifts to the world.

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