

Great Expectations

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"Nativity Scene" by Paul Chidlaw (1900-1989)

Prayer of Illumination

God of light, you have revealed your very self to us
in your son Jesus Christ, your one Word made flesh,
who lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Open us to your revelation once again,
that in the words of your holy scripture
we might know your presence and
follow in your light always. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7 (NRSVue)

The Birth of Jesus

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

MEDITATION – “Great Expectations”



A theme we've had throughout this Advent is the importance of paying attention. Or as Jesus says, *"What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'WATCH.'"* Pray and live with your eyes wide open. According to some scholars, the root word of religion is *"lig"* which means to "pay attention."

Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes defines love as "Attention—paying attention to the other person. Opening oneself up to attention." Prayer is paying attention to God. Loving attention. It's *praying* attention to God. Jesus said that you treasure what you pay attention to—what you set your heart on.

We have much to learn from Joseph and Mary in our attention-deficit-disorder world. To pay attention goes against the grain of our culture. Rather than getting or clamoring for attention or being the center of attention, Jesus calls us to pay attention. Paying attention means your life exists beyond yourself. Paying attention helps you hear the signal in the midst of the static. It filters out the white, brown, and pink noise. When you pay attention—your spiritual rabbit ears are attuned to your surroundings and to God. You can connect the dots. You begin to see relationships between things.

Paying attention means we have our spiritual receivers tuned in to God's frequencies. Signals are going on all around us—we're awash in a sea of waves. Radio waves: Bluetooth, cell phones, and wi-fi utilize radio waves. There are infra-red waves, light waves, and microwaves, sound waves, water waves, and x-rays, s-waves, and p-waves.

Waves surround us and pass through us and walls. But we're oblivious to them if we never have our receivers turned on. They do nothing for us if we're not synced to them.

The Bible is all about paying attention to and picking up on God's sign language to us:

- Noah and the sign of the rainbow.
- Abraham and the sign of circumcision.
- Moses and the Exodus with the sign of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.
- Samson and the sign of his hair.
- And for Mary and Joseph trusting God's sign of the miraculous birth of a child, Immanuel, God with us.

Let's reflect on Mary first.



It's easy for us Protestants to gloss over Mary, beyond giving her the starring role in the Christmas pageant. We know Mary as the "Virgin Mary." We say that phrase in the Apostle's Creed—one of our oldest and most widely accepted creeds throughout Christianity.

Why is that such an important element of our faith?

The virgin birth signifies important truths:

- the **holiness of the Child**—Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Ghost."
- the **uniqueness of the Child**—this is an unprecedented event.
- the **divinity of the Child**—because it means that he is the Son of God.

But no one experienced, Immanuel, *God with us*, quite like Mary. She felt the Messiah expanding in her belly and elbowing in the womb. She fed and changed him. Picked him up when he fell learning to walk. What jumps out to me is **how Mary approached it all with great wonder**.

Luke says that Mary "pondered all these things in her heart." In faith, she knew that **she had been the place** of a miracle sighting.

In Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament, he has Mary say in the *Magnificat*,

"I am only the workshop in which God operates."

Lifting God high, *she was* her son's servant.

In a similar way to Mary, the gift of God's grace has been at work in us long before we knew it. And the Lord gives us the opportunity to respond in faith in our lives saying: *"I am only the workshop in which you operate, God. Let it be according to your word."*

This is our Christmastide challenge:

Can we offer ourselves as Mary did and **let God form Christ in us?**

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ lives in us.

- *Is Christ's life showing in you?*
- *How far along are you?*
- *Do you have a glow about you?*
- *Are you caring for yourself, with Christ in you?*

Let's reflect on Joseph now.



We don't really know much about Joseph. He was a carpenter. King David was in his family tree. The gospels describe him as a *just* man. In [Matthew's Gospel](#), Joseph agonized over news of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph loved Mary. He loved Jesus. Loved his family. He was a good man. It's interesting to note that Joseph never speaks in the gospels. Maybe he was the strong silent type. But he definitely wasn't passive—honorably carrying out his charge to protect the life of his family and the Messiah. Joseph was first to hear the name to be given to the Savior of the world:

Jesus—Yeshua, or Joshua—which means "the Lord saves."

We don't know too much more than this, but we know Joseph listened loud and clear.

- He believed God could speak through dreams.
- He heeded the angel's message—on three different occasions.
- He married Mary and trusted that this was a miraculous birth.
- He took his family to Egypt to protect Jesus.
- He returned with them when it was safe.
- Joseph may have been a man of few words—but he wasn't just a wallflower.
- He *paid attention*.

And he paid attention to the signs and symbols of the Spirit—not to insignificant signs like status symbols or economic symbols.

Joseph reminds us to focus on the signs and symbols of the Spirit that God's speaking to us through. But even more, both Mary and Joseph inspire us to focus upon Christ—whom everything points to.

Amen.

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