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Dear Friends,

...and Mary said, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord"

This year, as Christmas approaches, the sense of expectancy and hope that is usually in the air during Advent has been overwhelmed by a deep sense of sadness. Life will never be the same again. Loss and suffering, anxiety and sadness, frustration and confusion are all around us; it has been a year like no other. Christmas has always been a moment in time overloaded with emotions it can barely hold. The sadness of the empty chair, the loved one we miss like crazy, a Christmas that will be the last one; all this is held within the gospel narrative.

You can hardly tell the real Christmas story without shedding a tear unless you believe in the nostalgic, saccharine-coated version of a young woman in blue gazing adoringly at her new-born as if it has nothing to do with his dying far too soon. Let's get real. You don't need much imagination to know this story is all about the mess we find ourselves in. Joseph and Mary face the unimaginable and unexpected loss of the future they had dreamed of. The baby they never planned brought each of them anxiety, confusion, shame and grief. Is their story a sad one with a happy ending or a happy one with a sad ending? Or is it something else?

When mighty Caesar's edict demanded everyone be registered back in their ancestral home this embryo family, along with countless others, was forced to make a long journey. Mary and Joseph travelled some 90 miles or so, walking in the heat along dusty, hilly, stony roads. I imagine they endured long nights huddled together thinking about an uncertain future. Mary surely dreaded giving birth along the way in the dust and possibly in public. Thankfully, her contractions began as they neared Bethlehem bedraggled and exhausted. Joseph's worst fears were confirmed. Not one of their distant relatives offers them the hospitality they might have given even to strangers. Deep down Joseph had always suspected no family member would wish to be associated with him or risk their reputation by welcoming Mary into their home. You have seen far too many infant nativities if you believe that once upon a time inn keeper after inn keeper slammed the door in this couple's face saying, "no room at the inn." Yet hear the story afresh for 2020 and take heart; yours is not the only dysfunctional family with at least one member ostracised.

Finally, Mary and Joseph are offered a place to stay. You know too many Botticelli, Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Rubens and El Greco paintings if you imagine this is a stable or a cave or a sort of gazebo made of wattle and thatch. It is probably none of these things; go to Palestine and you will see. When her waters broke and after hours in agony Mary surely pushed her firstborn out onto the mucky floor where animals slept beneath an ordinary Bethlehem villager's home. The lowing oxen, the braying donkey, the starry sky and the little lantern hanging from a beam may be artistic license but the blood, sweat and tears, and the excruciating pain are for real. I know and I've delivered five sons in relative comfort! Mary barely more than a child herself gives birth to her unplanned babe far from home and without the support of her family.

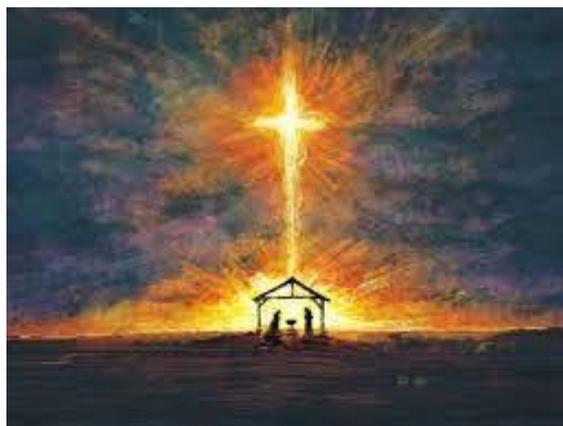
Now, despite the shame that surrounds this birth, the exhaustion of the journey and her labour, Mary holds her first born with a sense of confusion, wonder, fear and maybe even joy. She has survived. And Joseph, who has stood by her, journeyed with her and watched the birth, must now try to love and raise this child.



If the story is to be believed, some dirty shepherds show up as if to witness the event. One young lad, perhaps no older than the boy David who tended his father Jesse's sheep on the same hills long ago, brings a newborn lamb. Oh dear, like those famous painters my imagination is running away with me. But there must be a lamb, "Oh lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world have mercy on me". And, as for Joseph who is already in a state of disbelief, the arrival of shepherds is unbelievable. Why would God choose to announce the birth of his Son to them rather than to priests and prophets? Well, maybe you have to start somewhere ... and, after all, David the shepherd boy grew to be a king.

Years later, when another story is penned by another writer, wise men visit bring symbolic gifts - and now the penny drops. These stories are neither myth, nor legend. They are not simply crafted with artistic or poetic license. They speak truth; they do theology (they speak about God). This child has been born for rich and poor, for the wise and for the foolish, for the learned and the uneducated....and that means all of us.

On this last Sunday before Christmas and in the days ahead we shall come face to face with the truth, if we would only believe it, that God enters our world in the face of a tiny baby and that God lives his life in the rough and tumble and pain of the world. In the stories he tells, in the life that he leads and in the death that he dies we see hope being offered in the face of despair, life given even in the face of death and love triumphing over evil. None of this reverses the heartache of living in the midst of loss and grief and broken dreams. Mary knew that, Joseph knew that and so did their love child who wept at the grave of a friend. All of us have suffered loss this year. Some of us have merely lost a way of life. Some of us have lost a parent, or grandparent an auntie or uncle, a sibling, a friend or a lover. Others like Mary lost a child. We feel that grief even when we look at nostalgic paintings and suitably sanitised crib scenes and Christmas cards..



God enters our world as one of us and God suffers in his Christ just as we do. God does not say sickness, injustice, grief or broken dreams will simply be fixed beyond this life but enters into the very life we lead and redeems it. He teaches us to transform the pain by entering into it, to confront sickness by drawing alongside it, to face injustice by naming it and changing it. And, in these stories, the One God seen in a human life somehow brings to birth a little something of himself in our hearts so that we might walk in his ways and bring a bit of heaven to earth in the here and now.

When Christmas comes, even if this has been the worst year of your life, I hope and pray that you will know God's presence in your midst and proclaim with Mary the greatness of the Lord.

Wishing you God's blessings this Christmas

Vicki
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A typical basic Palestine house. The top area is where a little family lives. They roll up their mats in the day, so even that is small, and the animals sleep underneath.

