

Christmas Eve Morning
December 24, 2006
Luke 1:39-56

A couple of weeks before Christmas, an elderly man in Phoenix telephoned his adult son in New York. He told him, “Son, your mother and I have been married for 40 years, and I just wanted to call to tell you we have decided to get a divorce.”

His son was aghast. He said, “Dad, that’s terrible! Don’t you and mother do a thing until I have a chance to come and talk to you. I’ll be on the next plane to Phoenix!”

They hung up. The son immediately called his sister in Chicago. He told her, “Sis, Dad just called. He told me that he and mom are getting a divorce.”

His sister replied, “Like heck they are! I’ll meet you in Phoenix, and we’ll talk some sense into them.”

She hung up and immediately telephoned her father. She said to him, “Dad, my brother just called to tell me that, after 40 years of marriage, you and mom have decided to get a divorce. Don’t you do a thing until I have had a chance to talk with you. I’ll be on the next plane to Phoenix.”

Her father hung up the phone. He turned to his wife and said, “Honey, both kids are going to be home for Christmas, and... they are paying their own way!”

Barbie is in seventh heaven when our children and their families are around her. A very loving mother and grandmother she is. And the food must be good, for they keep showing up each year!

This morning, our thoughts are focused on the subject of today’s gospel reading from Luke – Mary. When Mary gave birth to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, she did not have her earthly family around her, nor was she in her own home, but in a crowded unfamiliar city, giving birth in, of all places, an animal stall.

Today's gospel is a story which centers on the events leading to the birth of Jesus. Put together two people, definitely one very young; drop them into a place that is foreign to them; provide them with instructions that are vague, seemingly incomplete and very demanding; set unclear time limits and give them ostensibly inadequate tools to accomplish their task. And, by all means, do not tell them of the outcome desired. Be sure to tell them that the entire company's health will depend upon their success, as nothing motivates anyone like stress. Sounds very much like a recipe for disaster, doesn't it?

This is the kind of situation in which Mary and Joseph may have found themselves so very long ago. Mary and Joseph were young. They were engaged to be married, and like all young couples, busy planning their wedding. Barbie and I saw the movie, "The Nativity Story," the first day it was released in this area. We found this film to portray the difficulties the young couple experienced quite accurately and scripturally sound. We saw through the medium of film, pictorial images of what Mary and Joseph may have experienced as they struggled to fulfill the Lord's plan. Now, when I read again the Christians story from the Bible, I have accurate mental graphic images to help me understand the difficulties Mary and Joseph experienced.

We remember that each one, Mary and Joseph, was visited by an angel who gave them instructions. To Mary, Gabrielle said, "*You will conceive in the power of the Holy Spirit. You will give birth to a son. You will name him Jesus. He is the promised Messiah. The world is counting on you and what you do!*"

Bethlehem, yes, it was the city of King David. But then, as it is now, is a little backwater village with only history as its claim to fame. One would think that with these elements, Mary and Joseph were doomed to failure. But then we remember how amazing it is at what God can do with humble beginnings. Mary and Joseph were not doomed to failure as might be expect, because the recipe for success was given them by God as their chef. When God is the cook, like Emerald Lagasse of the Food Channel, God "Kicks it up a notch" and awesome things happen.

Luke recalls how Mary, following Gabriel's announcement to her, went with great haste to her close relative, Elizabeth, to tell her of the good news. Terry, I seem to recall that at Christmas time, you sing a beautiful song of

Mary. I hope that you plan to do it this year for I haven't heard it for quite some time now.

For Mary, *and Joseph*, was Gabrielle's message to Mary truly good news or a recipe for disaster? When one remembers the times they were living in, this good news of Gabriel brought not only a few anxious moments. Two years ago, Barbie and I were privileged to see in Lancaster, PA, the Millennium Theater's production of "The Miracle of Christmas." This production, as well as the current film, "The Nativity Story, brought home to us quite well the trials and tribulations Mary and Joseph experienced. If there is any thing to be learned from the events leading to the birth of Christ it is that when God uses us as his instruments, plan on being tested to the fullest. If Mary and Joseph's commitment were so tested, why then should we think that we would be immune to such testing? Yet, it is only in keeping our commitment to God through whatever testing is placed before us that we achieve salvation and eternal life.

In our permissive society of today, news of out of wedlock pregnancies is accepted without batting an eye. No longer is there any cultural or social scorn directed to such situations. However, as we all know, such was not the case for Mary. The emotional strain experienced by this very young girl of 15 or 16 had to be enormous. Mary could have been shunned by Joseph or worse yet, stoned to death. Such were the times. My, how far *our* society has progressed? Progressed to where?

And if this was not enough to bear, what did this young couple need to do just at the time Mary was due to give birth – but to travel some 60 difficult and rugged miles, on the back of a donkey, to the little insignificant and overcrowded village of Bethlehem.

I well remember when Barbie was pregnant with our children. When we traveled to Geneva to visit her family, we passed through the small community of Caledonia. To enter this quiet village, we needed to drive over a set of railroad tracks immediately followed by the roadway dropping some 6 to 8 feet. Well, if I didn't slow the car down sufficiently enough for her comfort when crossing those tracks and hitting that sudden drop off, she would let me know about it in no uncertain terms!

Based upon Barbie's experience, I can only but imagine the discomfort and anxiety Mary endured on that arduous journey to Bethlehem. Mary had to

be thoroughly exhausted upon in reaching Bethlehem. And Joseph, the loving caring, concerned husband, his wife's condition weighing heavily on his shoulders. And then, upon entering the village, experiences frustration beyond belief as he knocks on one door after another seeking shelter. What eventually came to be is the history we all know so well. Shelter eventually was found and Jesus was born, his first cradle a feeding trough for the animals in the stall.

What were the feelings of Mary after giving birth to our Lord? We get some idea from Luke, 2:19, a verse that has had an impact upon me for as long I have known this story. Luke writes, "*Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.*" This verse brings to memory my coming into the delivery room after Barbie had given birth. I saw the look in her eyes and the expression of her face. I observed awesome serene joy and contentment. There was very little to be said. When holding a new born baby, no words can to be said that could adequately express her feelings at the moment of receiving God's precious new gift of life. Could it be that Barbie experienced those same feelings and thoughts as young Mary did with Jesus, pondering them in her heart?

Tonight, we celebrate once again the birth of the Savior Jesus. However, in the Christian walk, the topic of giving birth doesn't stop with that first Christmas. The biblical word, *birth*, is used some 44 times in the New Testament alone! Jesus was born through the working of the Holy Spirit. We, too, are to be born from above by the Holy Spirit. John 3:6 records Jesus stating that unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, one cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.

As there is a process of physical birth, so there is a process of spiritual birth. Being born of water refers to the sacrament of Baptism. The water of baptism is an outward sign of repentance. To participate in the water of the baptism of Christ, we are to repent, to change our old ways of life. This change is made evident through the transformation of old habits and deeds. Throwing off old ways of life is the only the first part of this spiritual birthing process. Being born spiritually, being born from above, we see everything differently and new. That which was once thought to be precious now becomes worthless. That which was once thought to be worthless now becomes precious. That for which we earnestly struggle now is rejected.

As in the painful and sometimes difficult process of a woman giving birth, so may be the process of being born anew of the Holy Spirit when we encounter the trials and temptations of this life. Here, we need to keep in mind a new mother's joy and excitement, her peace and contentment at childbirth. As it is with her, so does Jesus experience with us when we are born a new, born from above. Just as the infant child Jesus was cradled in the arms of Mary and nourished by her, so we are cradled and nourished by Jesus, when born of the Holy Spirit and commit ourselves to follow him.

We look forward to Christmas 2006. We look forward to experience once again the remembrance and blessings of Christ's birth.

An anonymous writer wrote a definition of a baby: *A baby is a small member of the home that makes love stronger, days shorter, nights longer, the bank account smaller, the home happier, clothes shabbier, the past forgotten, and the future worth living for.*"

In the baby Jesus of Christmas 2006, the future, our eternal future, definitely is worth living for.