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There is always a letdown the week after Christmas. How could it be otherwise? Christmas demands so much of us. Now it's back to the humdrum of ordinary living. Plus a few extra bills to pay. Some unknown author spoke for many of us:

'Twas the week after Christmas and all through the house

Nothing would fit me, not even a blouse.

The cookies I'd nibbled, the eggnog I'd taste

At the holiday parties had gone to my waist.

When I got on the scales there arose such a number!

When I walked to the store (less a walk than a lumber),

I'd remember the marvelous meals I'd prepared:

The gravies and sauces and beef nicely rared,

The bread and the cheese/ And the way I'd never said, "No, thank you, please."

As I dressed myself in my husband's old shirt

And prepared once again to do battle with dirt

I said to myself as only I can: "You can't spend a winter disguised as a man!"

So away with the last of the sour cream dip,

Get rid of the fruit cake, every cracker and chip.

Every last bit of food that I like must be vanished.

I won't have a cookie--not even a lick.

I'll only chew on a long celery stick.

I won't have hot biscuits or corn bread or pie.

I'll munch on a carrot and quietly cry.

I'm hungry, I'm lonesome and life is a bore. But isn't that what January is for?

Unable to giggle, no longer a riot. Happy New Year to all and to all a good diet! (1)

I won't ask you to raise your hand if you can identify with her sad plight. But that, of course, is why health clubs are so full in January.

That's how we feel a few days after Christmas. I wonder how Mary and Joseph felt after the shepherds had left them, and the wise men, and the angels were no longer singing. After these amazing events, they had to return to the real world just as we do following Christmas. The Gospels vary in what comes next. Mark, of course, tells us nothing of Christ's birth. He begins with John the Baptist preparing the way in the wilderness. John also doesn't say anything about Christ's birth, but he does give us a beautiful theological discourse on the meaning of Christ's coming: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men . . ." That light, of course, was Christ. Then John also begins with the baptism by John.

Only Matthew tells us of Mary and Joseph's sudden journey to Egypt to escape Herod's deadly wrath. What irony. The King of Kings, a refugee, on the run with his family because of one evil man. I'm glad that's not the end of the story. Today, the only reason we are even familiar with Herod is because he was threatened by the birth of a babe, Jesus.

Well, for one thing, Mary and Joseph and Jesus went on with their lives. That's the first thing that happened. They went on with their lives. There were good times and bad times. Remember when Jesus remained at the Temple. Then he tells his mother that he had to be about his father's business. I sure Joseph wanted to give him, "You don't talk to your mother like that!" Mostly there were just ordinary times. They weren't immune to the trials that trouble us all. They were members of what we might call the working class. They were poor, as were most people in that occupied land. But Joseph had a trade, he was a carpenter, and they got by. But life was not easy. Have you ever noticed? Life's not easy for most people.

There is an amusing true story about a man named Maurice King. Maurice became displeased with his barber. His barber was not particularly adept with a razor. Rarely would Maurice leave this barber's shop without a new collection of nicks and scratches. Even more disturbing, Maurice became a little concerned that his barber's tools weren't as sanitary as they could be. So he invented a germ-killing blue liquid that he began marketing to barber shops and hair salons. Even today, you walk into any salon or barber shop and you'll see glass jars of this pale blue liquid on the counters. It's used for soaking razors, scissors, combs and other equipment. What's the name of this blue liquid? Barbicide. The name is a little inside joke thought up by Maurice King after a particularly bad trip to the barber. I say it's an inside joke because the word Barbicide means "kill the barber." Look for it at your favorite barber shop or hair salon.

(2)

Well, Mary and Joseph didn't escape life's nicks and scratches. Neither did Jesus. Jesus was a child like any other child, and as such he surely had his bumps and bruises growing up. There are some people who think that Jesus surely had some kind of protective shield surrounding him growing up since he was the Son of God. That's not true. It's important for us to understand that when Christ came into our world, he emptied himself completely and became as we are so that he might experience what we experience. And bumps and bruises are part of what it means to be human.

It would be nice to escape life's hurts, wouldn't it? An article in Wired Magazine sometime back reported that a team at MIT has developed some new high-tech materials that promise the potential for turning ordinary people into supermen and superwomen. These scientists have developed materials with properties that mimic human muscles. You put on this suit and even your muscles have muscles. They are working with the military with the aim of producing a "superman suit" for the armed forces. Such a suit could enable soldiers to run, jump and lift to a nearly superhuman degree. (3) That would be nice, wouldn't it?

Well Jesus had no such suit. He faced obstacles common to boys of his time. He probably faced bullies like boys and girls today face bullies. He had to learn his lessons just like you and I learn our lessons. To complicate things, it seems likely that his earthly father Joseph died during Jesus' teenage years. Nothing more is said about him after the visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve. There were several younger cousins. Since extended families were responsible for the raising of children not just the nuclear family, Jesus would have had to take on adult responsibilities. Maybe this is why he did not begin his ministry until he was thirty. Jesus experienced fully what it means to be human. Any problem that you or I face today, we can be certain, in some form, he faced it too. Mary and Joseph faced these problems, too. What did this young family do during the portions of their life that are not recorded in scripture? They went on with their lives. They did what you and I do. They did the best they could and they trusted God.

I wonder if Mary realized how short her time with Joseph and Jesus would be? Maybe she did. Life spans were much shorter then than they are now. But no one's really prepared to be widowed, are they? Particularly when they are quite young. Mary may have lost Joseph when she was still in her twenties or early thirties. She was likely in her late forties when she experienced the unspeakable tragedy of watching her son die an excruciating death on the cross of Calvary. You think you hurt. Imagine how she hurt. "A sword will pierce your soul." I wonder if she had any idea that her time with her beloved husband and her beloved son would be so brief.

When the World Trade Center was brought down by terrorists, many families had their lives forever torn to pieces. One man got home from work the evening of September 11th to hear a message from his wife on the answering machine. She worked in the twin towers and on the answering machine, she asked him, "Honey, can you get the kids up from soccer today? Someone in the car pool can't make it. We're out of pasta if you think of it for dinner. I love you. See you around seven." And in the days following the destruction of those twin towers, he sat, playing that message over and over. (4)

I doubt that Mary thought very much about losing her loved ones until it happened. That's really for the best. We would worry ourselves sick if we did think too much about losing those we love. I guess it's best that we don't know what the future may bring. Life can be very cruel even to the best of people. Mark those words down. Even to the best of people. Can people ever get any better than the holy family of Nazareth Mary, Joseph and Jesus? And yet they had difficult lives. Why should you and I think that God will build a wall around us to protect us from life's slings and arrows? Mary lost the two most important people in her world much too early, but it is always too early. None of us knows what tomorrow may bring.

But here's the final thing to be said about this young family of Mary, Joseph and their first child Jesus: They were a family, and they sustained themselves with love and with faith in God.

In the end it really didn't matter what life sent their way. A birth in a stable, a flight to Egypt to escape persecution, the loss of Joseph, Jesus' problems with the religious authorities and finally his death on the cross. No event was serious enough to destroy their love for one another. Oh, there were times when they disagreed with one another just like sometimes we disagree in our families. Jesus' relations with his family were quite strained at one point early on in his ministry. His Mother and his family were as confused as anyone else at some of the claims he made. Yet both Mary and his family were active participants in the early church following his death and resurrection. They were still a family. And they still had their faith. Of course, they had even more faith after his resurrection. They knew then they never need be afraid of life's many heartbreaks ever again. He had overcome the world. They could overcome the world as well. That's a lesson that you and I need to learn with our families too.

Bruce and Darlene Marie Wilkinson in their book *The Dream Giver for Parents* tell about a teenager who noticed that his father worried himself nearly to death, trying unsuccessfully to be everywhere and do everything to protect his child from life's difficulties. This young man wrote his father the following note:

"I am sure you remember, Dad, how you used to tell me stories when I was young and was afraid or insecure. Well, I have noticed that you are often worried about what might become of me when you're not there to help. Now I want to remind you of one of the stories we read together when I was little.

It's the story of the rooster who got up before dawn every day to sit on the roof of the farmhouse and crow so that the sun would rise. Because that's what he really believed: that it was his responsibility to make the sun come up. He was always afraid that if he didn't crow, everything would go wrong. He kept worrying: What would happen if I fell ill, or even died? How would the crops grow, and the children wake up in time for school, and the frost melt, and the flowers blossom if I weren't there to make the sun rise? The world would become cold and dark; all the grass and the trees would die and the people too eventually . . .

Then one evening, Rooster attended a party and overslept the next morning. The other animals realized that he was not there to make the sun come up and were just about to panic when they saw a glimmer of light on the horizon . . . It was the sun rising without Rooster! Rooster was miserable when he found out that he had nothing to do with the sun's rising every morning. And embarrassed! But he was also extremely relieved. What a weight off my shoulders, he thought, that I don't have to I can't make the sun come up! Yet, every morning, there it is. There must be Someone Else taking care of all this.

Dad, you light up my life, but it really isn't your responsibility to "make the sun rise for me." I know that you know Someone Else is taking care of me. (5)

That was a lesson that Mary and Joseph had to learn. And it's a lesson I hope you and I have learned as well. God will take care of those we love and God will take care of us. Mary and Joseph went on with their lives following Christmas, and so shall we. They faced life's many challenges, but they did it with love and with faith in God. It was not easy, but they knew God was with them, just as God is with us. It's good to know. Indeed, it's the best Good News in the world.

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1. Contributed by Dr. John Bardsley
2. Charles Kuralt with Peter Freundlich, *American Moments* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 70-71.
3. David Cameron, "Artificial Muscles Gain Strength," February 15, 2002, www.techreview.com/articles/cameron021502.asp. Cited by Henry G. Brinton, http://www.fairfaxpresby.com/worship/sermons/2002_sermons/10-06-02_sermon.htm.
4. Rev. Joe Gastiger, <http://www.uccdekalb.org/resources/sermons/ser4-3-05.shtml>.
5. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), pp. 102-103

II

One of the most beautiful of the modern Christmas songs was written by a man who is best known, perhaps, as a comedian. His name is Mark Lowry. Lowry is also a musician of some note. He performed for many years with the Gaither Vocal band. In 1984 he was asked to pen some words for his local church choir and he wrote a poem that began like this, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?"

A few years later guitarist Buddy Greene added a perfectly matching tune and a wonderful song was born. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod? Mary, did you know when you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God!" Each of the little couplets touches the heart in a wonderful way. "Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation? Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?" (1) The song's been around now for nearly two decades. Listen for it on the radio. The most popular version is sung by Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd. Mary, did you know . . . ?

How could Mary know what was happening to her when the angel Gabriel came to her long ago? Only Luke tells this story. The Gospel of Luke is often called the Gospel of womanhood because Luke has so many positive stories about women. In fact, there are eight positive stories about women in Luke's gospel. Later in Luke's Gospel you will discover stories about Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and the woman who anointed Jesus' body for burial. In the book of Acts, also written by Luke, we hear another positive story about a business woman, Lydia, the maker of purple. Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth from Mary's point of view. The angel Gabriel is the messenger of God. He has already announced to an elderly gentleman named Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, despite her old age. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Then Gabriel visits Mary. Following Gabriel's visit to her, you may remember, Mary visits Elizabeth and the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumps when they meet. You won't find these kinds of details in the other Gospels. (2)

What does it mean to be favored by God? This is an important question. Evidently it doesn't mean that your life is going to be a bed of roses.

"But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

"How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'"

This is interesting. Mary is not married. She's still a virgin. And she's going to have a baby. Is this something she should get excited about? Zechariah and Elizabeth had been married for many years. For most of those years they had been praying for a child. The birth of their son John in their old age was literally an answer to prayer. I doubt that the same thing can be said for Mary. She was a teenager and she was about to become an unwed mother. Whoopee! Mary and Joseph lived within a strict community regulated by religious laws and customs. Mary could have been stoned for being pregnant and unmarried. And imagine Joseph's hurt. She's supposed to be happy about this? God has an interesting way of showing His favor.

Years ago a psychologist named Thomas Holmes developed a scale for measuring stress. He assigned numerical values to events that cause stress such as the loss of job, moving to a new city, a new relationship. Dr. Holmes even included Christmas on his stress list. He decided that just a normal Christmas was worth a hefty 14 stress points. Some of you understand. You're up to 15 or 20 stress points right now.

A writer by the name of Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes' scale and applied it to Mary. Holmes calculated that any pregnancy earns 40 points: an unwanted pregnancy, add 20 more. A change in living conditions Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth earns 25 more. Marriage to Joseph: 50 points. A change in financial status: 38 points.

Surely there must have been words between them when she discovered that he had not made reservations at the inn: score 35 points for an argument with a spouse.

And then the birth--39 points: 16 for a change in sleeping habits; 15 for a change in eating habits. Not to mention all those uninvited guests: shepherds and angels coming and going and wise men from the East.

Psychologist Thomas Holmes says that people get sick when they reach 200 points on his stress scale. Ms. Kuhns calculates that Mary's ordeal earned her a record 424 points. (3) This, of course, does not even include the flight to Egypt. Or even more importantly, the experience of watching her beloved son die as a common criminal on a cross. Is this what it means to be favored of God? Evidently being favored of God does not protect you from life's bumps and bruises.

This is an important truth. It is so easy for us to say when things are going our way, "We are blessed." That sounds so pious, doesn't it?. We may be in for a big surprise. It may be that one day we will be the ones who will hear the Lord say, "I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink . . ." (Matthew 25:31-46) Maybe the reason things seem to be going our way is that we are living only for ourselves. It's easy to have a merry Christmas with lots of fine presents under the tree when we insulate ourselves from the world's problems. Rather than blessing us, God may actually despise our opulent self-indulgence.

Conversely, if we are going through a difficult time in our life right now when we feel like we can barely hold on, God may be very close to us. The angel Gabriel, in saying that Mary was blessed by God, was not saying that God would make her way easy. What he was saying was that Mary would be used of God, and in the long run of life, this is what being blessed means. How about you? Can you say that right now you are being used by God for a purpose? Be careful whom you call favored by God.

Gabriel told Mary that she was favored by God and that she would bear a son. And Mary asked a sensible question: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Good question.

Here is how the angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Underline that last sentence: **Nothing is impossible with God.** I have often wondered, is it anymore difficult to believe that God gave Mary a virgin birth than it is to believe that Abraham and Sarah and Zechariah and Elizabeth bore children at an advanced age? Certainly Mary in her shame could have lied about the visit of an angel, but there was no way that Elizabeth, who was far beyond child bearing years could make up a story about her pregnancy. It was a miracle! If Elizabeth were much younger than Zechariah, there could be another explanation, but that was not the case. It was a miracle. And Jesus' birth was a miracle. If scientists were to announce tomorrow that a virgin birth had been created in the laboratory, not a one of us would dispute it. Science can do such amazing things nowadays. But we want to deny the God who created science the ability to manipulate the laws of the universe and to give a baby a unique birth. That's absurd. Jesus' birth was a miracle. Underline it again. Nothing is impossible with God. Remember that the next time you are in a hard place. Nothing is impossible with God. Now there are many theologians and Bible scholars who have real difficulty with the notion of a virgin birth. That's all right. It really doesn't matter to most of us how God sent Christ into the world, only that He did. Look to whom His coming was announced by the angels

I. Shepherd Teach Us Humility

A. The very first thing which Shepherds Teach Us is Humility. You see Shepherds were some of the poorest of the poor. Their livelihood was vital to the economy. The wool and meat from the sheep was essential. And yet like so many of the people involved in essential services today, they were looked down upon. They were like the trashmen or sanitation workers or the cleanup crews at the ball park. Nobody ever took the time to get to know them. And because their job smelled, most people thought they did, too.

Like smarmy used car salesman or sleazy Televangelist today, in that time, Shepherds were only a rung or two above lepers in the social pecking order. They were looked upon as untrustworthy and thought of more like we think of gypsies or the "travelers."

And worst of all, they were unclean. It was just a blanket statement about all shepherds, no matter how faithful or how deeply committed to serving God they were. They were unclean by virtue of the job they performed. You see, touching any kind of dung, even just stepping in it accidentally, made you unclean.

And shepherds couldn't help but step in it every now and then. Even if they didn't, the sheep they herded had and touching them, which shepherds had to do, made them unclean. So, shepherds were the outcasts, the untouchables, the people no one but other shepherds wanted to be around.

B. You might be asking yourself "What difference does that make?" From the moment of Jesus' birth, God proclaimed the Good News of Salvation for everyone, no matter what place or station in life. God chose the last in society, the Shepherds, to be the first to know. God actually practiced what Jesus would preach. "The last shall be first and the first last."

The shepherds were also ready to hear some good news. They were ready for hope. But if you read about Herod and his palace staff, they were all suspicious and afraid. All they could think about was what they had to protect. They saw the birth of this baby as a threat to their power, authority, position, wealth and even their way of life. That is the reaction of Pride.

But the shepherds, on the other hand, they didn't have much of anything at all, just the few family possessions they needed for daily life, just the basics. What they needed most was hope and faith. When they received that message of hope, they dropped everything to see this new born baby lying in a manger. They rejoiced and they couldn't wait to tell anyone who would listen. That is the action of Humility. Shepherds Teach Us Humility.

II. Shepherds Teach Us To Risk

A. Secondly, Shepherds Teach Us To Risk. Most of us are quite contented where we are spiritually. We like where we are. It feels good. We feel close to God. We feel safe. It's comfortable. Unfortunately, faith isn't about comfort. And certainly walking with Christ isn't supposed to be comfortable, not when He says things like, "Take up your cross and follow me." I don't think he was talking about jewelry either. I'm pretty sure Jesus was talking about a lifestyle where we become more and more like Christ. If we are seeking to become more like Christ, the we WILL take risks. And we'll look at the Shepherds of the world with different eyes.

B. A number of years ago, we hosted a Missionary who was serving in New Mexico and working with the Native Americans. He related that in the sheep country of New Mexico, the shepherds were having trouble with losing lambs in the late winter and early spring.

It seems the ewes would take their lambs out to graze, and late in the day it would start to snow. The temperature would drop, and the ewes would continue grazing. The lambs would lie down on the frozen ground and before long would freeze to death. The shepherds got together to discuss the problem. They determined that the ewes, covered with wool, didn't feel the temperature change.

The shepherds came up with a rather unique solution. They took shears and sheared just the top of the head of the ewes. The ewes could feel the change in the weather, and head back to the barn. That solution saved many of the lambs.

Sometimes our hearts get all warm and woolly. It's not wrong; we like that warm fuzzy feeling, and we get comfortable with it. But maybe, we get a bit too comfortable, too contented with our good fortune and the blessings of life. And when that happen we get to a point that we can't feel what others are feeling. We're so comfortable that we don't want to risk changing anything.

However, when we don't take any risks in our faith journey, then we risk losing our way and we risk losing our relationship.

The Holy Spirit needs to shear our hearts of some of that wool so that we too can feel the hurts and the pains and the needs of those around us. We need the Holy Spirit to shear the wool of our hearts so we can see the Shepherds in our midst and risk acknowledging them. We need the Holy Spirit to shear the wool of our hearts so we can feel and see who needs a word of hope and a reason to rejoice.

Shepherds Teach Us To Risk.

Conclusion

I think the challenge for us this season is to See the Shepherds in our midst. We have plenty of shepherds in the world today. Unfortunately as a society, we have become blind to them. We walk past them and pretend we don't even see them.

We ignore their presence and their signs of "will work for food."

We see them haul the garbage and toss it on the truck but never know their names.

We call them to clean out our septic tanks but don't want them in the house.

They are the silent nameless migrant workers who bend over to pick our lettuce, onions and other vegetables, always looking over their shoulders for fear of the immigration officials, all the while simply trying to make a better future for their families just like us.

We see them behind bars and think good riddance and never consider how we might help them. Yet these are the Shepherds of today. The outcasts, the lepers.

In our pride we overlook them. In our comfort we ignore them. But these are the folks to whom the message of the birth of Christ Jesus, the Savior, came first. There IS Room For Them Today because we still need to be challenged to Live Humbly and take Risks for the Kingdom of God.