

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 and a few extra pounds to work off. 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.

Luke tells us another story the story of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple to be consecrated. At the temple they encountered a man named Simeon. It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. When Simeon saw the young boy Jesus, he took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have

promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Then Simeon turned to Mary and said, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” Then he adds these disturbing words: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” An unusual thing to say to a young mother: “A sword will pierce your own soul too.” I wonder if these words sent a shiver through Mary’s heart.

And then Luke tells us about that adventure at the temple when Jesus was twelve, and then he, too, is silent until Jesus is thirty and ready to begin his ministry. What was happening during all this time in the weeks, months and years following Christ’s birth?

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. We have made the point many times before but it is so important. 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](http://www.techreview.com/articles/cameron021502.asp). Cited by Henry G. Brinton, [http://www.fairfaxpresby.com/worship/sermons/2002\\_sermons/10-06-02\\_sermon.htm](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.

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