

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (Jan. 1, 2018)
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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“Where did they go?”

On Saturday, I got in my car in to run a few errands. I turned on my radio, and couldn't wait to listen to some Christmas songs. I am a good Catholic. I know that the Christmas season lasts for several weeks. My blue spruce is going to stay up until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

So I turned on my XM radio, looking for my favorite Christmas channel. It wasn't there. I looked for the other Christmas channel. I was gone too. With disgust, I said, “Where did they go?” After all, they've been playing Christmas music on the radio since Labor Day (!!!) – why would they shut it off before New Year's Eve?

But Christmas is disappearing all over. Every store has ripped out the last vestiges of Christmas – Valentine's candy has replaced Santa, Joseph and Mary.

Where did they go?

We may need to ask the same question once we finish reading the Christmas Gospels, and start reading the rest of the narrative about Jesus' life.

There are so many attractive characters in the Christmas Gospels. We have images of them on our Christmas cards, we sing about them in carols.

Think of all the great characters of the Christmas narrative. The angel Gabriel. The parents of John the Baptist. Mary and Joseph. Baby Jesus. The shepherds. The magi. The angel choirs.

But as we get past the Christmas narrative in the Gospel of Luke, we may find ourselves asking, “Hey, where did they go?”

Almost all of the major characters in the Christmas story disappear quickly, and they are never mentioned again in the Gospel of Luke!

The angel Gabriel apparently moves to Florida and retires. The shepherds are never heard from again. When the adult Jesus starts to preach, not one person in the crowd says, “Hey I was in Bethlehem the night you were born.”

The Magi give their gifts, and never come for another visit. Even Joseph disappears.

All of these interesting people are present for the miraculous birth of Christ... and we never hear from them again.

Where did they go?

We *don't know* where they go. And frankly, Luke is not interested in telling us. Luke is interested in one thing - telling us what how to become faithful disciples of Jesus. And Luke does that very well in today's Gospel passage.

Luke says that the shepherds arrive from the fields, and they see the child – just as the angel had promised. They tell everybody about the angel's message. Everyone is astonished.

The shepherds go home. The angels stop singing. Joseph will make two more brief appearances in Luke's Gospel while Jesus is a child, then he will disappear too.

There is *one adult* in Luke's Gospel who is present in the Christmas story, who then gets mentioned in the rest of the Gospel narrative. And that one adult is... Mary.

Mary does not disappear. She is there as Jesus starts preaching. She is there in the ministry of Jesus. She is there when he is put on trial. She is there when he is crucified. She is there when they put his body in the tomb.

She is there, after the resurrection, waiting to see what will happen next.

So she is there at the very beginning , when the Holy Spirit is sent into her womb to give birth to the Savior. She is also there when that same Holy Spirit is sent to the early community, giving birth to the Church at Pentecost.

She is the only one who is there from beginning to end. Because, in Luke's Gospel, she is the one who can teach us how to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

What does Mary teach us? Well, in today's Gospel, while everyone else is rejoicing and then departing, Luke tells us that Mary rejoices, and then she *ponders*. Luke says, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart."

The Greek of this verse gives us the impression that Mary has to think things through. She has to ponder. She does not see everything clearly, at first. She has questions. She has to struggle to understand what God is up to, what her Son is going to require of her, how best to love him.

She is the one character in the Christmas story who ponders, who works to understand the meaning of all of this. And according to Luke, she is the one adult in the Christmas story who is present for the rest of the story... still pondering, still praying, still struggling to figure it out and apply it in her life.

So what is Mary teaching us about being a follower of Jesus? She is teaching us that *it requires work*. It requires the willingness to *think things through*, to take the time to remember, to ponder, to learn, to grow. True Christian wisdom and growth will require some sweat.

When I was home in Pennsylvania last week, I visited a family. They have three small children. At one point, as I was talking with their father, one of the children came up to him with a toy with was not working properly. She said to him, "Daddy, this doesn't work. Fix it for me." And he said, "You know the rule – figure it out for yourself." She walked away.

The dad said to me: "Children aren't taught how to struggle any more. They are not taught how to think things through or deal with difficulty. They try things once, and then they give up." So, in his family, they have a rule – *figure it out. Work at it. Don't give up.*

I think Mary lived by a similar rule. Yes, the angel Gabriel visited her to announce the good news of her miraculous pregnancy. But after that, there's not another instance where an angel appears and explains things to Mary.

She has to ponder. She has to think. She has to struggle. And she learns that, in the journey of faith, many things take time. Many mysteries take a lifetime to explore. Understanding how God is at work in any given situation may require that we step back, pray, think and give Christ all the time he needs in order to lead us to the truth.

As you think about your life on this New Year's Day, you may be saying to God, "It's broke. Fix it." There are parts of our society that don't seem to work anymore. There are parts of our world that seem broken. We may be confused by what God is up to, or stymied by the question: "Where is Jesus in all of this?"

And like a child with a broken toy, we may be inclined to run to God Our Father, asking him to fix it for us, answer it for us, clarify it for us... *right now!*

But Mary teaches us a basic truth about following Christ: it takes time, and it takes work, and it takes the willingness to ponder.

So put down your cell phone, turn off your computer, shut off the TV, stop distracting yourself

with your headsets or the home shopping network.

And follow the example of the Mother of God... Mary... who spent her life staying close to her Son, and taking the time each day to explore who he was and what he means.

And next New Year's Day, if someone asks you, "Where did *you* go in 2018?" You can answer, "Wherever God wanted to take me."

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