

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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January 1, 2017

I can't help but wonder what it was, exactly, that Mary was reflecting about and Keeping in her heart on that night in the Manger in Bethlehem. The Gospel of Luke simply calls it "all these things," but isn't more specific about it. And I can't help but wonder if one of her reflections was that her baby in the Manger looked so...ordinary. In fact, it may have looked something like her, bearing the family features on his little face.

She'd been told by the Angel that she would be bearing a Son of Almighty God, the savior of the whole world. I'll bet she was curious to know what an offspring Yahweh might look like, exactly. Surely there would be something conspicuous about his appearance, maybe exceptionally good-looking, well-tempered, Irish skin...? But there was none of that. Just her little infant son in the crib. Surely she must have wondered, "So this is God? My baby is God? Where? How?" This baby was surely her *son*, but where's the Christ part?

So undoubtedly, Mary was the first to understand that in order to discern the God part of this child, you need to begin by simply *being* with Him, watching closely, remembering the promises of the Angel and the exclamation of her cousin Elizabeth: i.e., *praying*, in faith.

And then came the shepherds. They, too, had witnessed the exaltation of the heavenly host of angels in the night sky. They, too, had been told of the arrival of God's Messiah into the world. They were told to go see the baby. I wonder what they, too, were expecting to find when they got there. Something extraordinary looking, I'm sure. A child who wouldn't look to be like just any other Jewish male. Right? They, too, looked upon this ordinary infant, and it was only after they had *seen* him that they proclaimed the glad tidings to everyone around.

But there was nothing spectacular to have been seen, not in the way we usually think of that word. Like Mary, one only understands the "God part" of this Jesus by coming close, watching carefully, and remembering the promises: i.e., *praying*, in faith.

And I can't help but wonder also whether part of Mary's reflections involved the question why God chose to send these shepherds—the poorest of the poor and the least respected of people—these *shepherds* to be the heralds of Christ's birth. Couldn't the angels just have come directly to the Manger to do their wonder working? Why involve a third party? Especially *these* third parties, whom people could so easily choose to ignore or to dismiss if they so chose? What could *that* mean?

It was only much later in history, when religious artists got hold of the story, that we began to see images of a manger that glowed or of halos around the heads of Jesus, Mary and Joseph that night. But that isn't the way it was on that first Christmas. In fact, that's the reason why the artists had to insert the haloes; without them this child would be indistinguishable from any other in the scene. Even the Bible tells us that...It's why King Herod, when he got wind of Jesus' birth, ordered the killing of *all* the little newborn boys in Israel, because you just couldn't tell by looking at them which one of them was the Newborn King of the Jews.

So it seems very likely that Mary's reflections involved how to understand the promise of God in a way that seemed too ordinary, too familiar and—in the case of the shepherds—too grubby and marginal. She came to understand that apart from prayer, we will *not* be able to understand that. Because on Christmas night God

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taught us that he was coming to earth in and through human form, ordinary human flesh. Not “over, behind and around” it. But *in* it. *In* the child, Jesus, the baby in the manger. *In* the lowly shepherds, the weak losers out in the fields.

It has always been easy to overlook such people as the most eloquent proclaimers of God’s presence in the world. It is still easy to do that, which is why so many do. Mary taught us by her example never to do that, and she still teaches us. As we honor her on this holy feast day, let us do so not merely as a historical memory, or as our intercessor faraway in heaven, but as the one who speaks to us now, by her witness at the Manger, inviting us to stay close to her son, to watch intently, and to remember the promises of God: i.e., to pray, in faith. And then to proclaim to all the world what we have seen and heard and know: God has come to us in human form. God is here, now.