

A NIGHT MOST STRANGE
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
The First Mass of Christmas
December 24, 2021

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:16-19)

For me, in all my life, there has never been a Christmas Eve that captured the strangeness and unexpectedness of the first Christmas Eve as completely as this one does. Think about the cast of characters. For Joseph, we can imagine that he is still processing the birth of a child whose advent he did not expect and was not prepared for. For the shepherds, an ordinary night in the fields has been interrupted by a most extraordinary visitation and instructions to share the news. And for Mary—well, can you begin to imagine? She’s already had an angelic visitation, her amazing encounter with Elizabeth, and now here she is, a new mother, listening to a confirmation from these unknown shepherds of what the angel had told her months before. Mary, Luke tells us, is silent at the shepherds’ report. She treasures and ponders their words.

The Greek word translated as “pondered”—*symballo*— means literally “to throw together.” Colloquially, it suggests “mulling over.” (*The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, p. 62) To say that Mary had a lot to mull over is an understatement. What is she to make of this strange night? As one commentator (*New Cambridge Commentary*, p. 63) says, the possibilities are many:

Is the world about to end?
Will all the hungry be fed?
Will economic resources be distributed?
Will the blind see and the deaf hear?
Will Satan be defeated?

All of these conclusions are possible on the basis of what Mary has experienced in the incredible months leading up to this night of nights. What had previously been the ordinary life of a young Palestinian Jewish woman—probably in her early teens—is now at the center of a cosmic shift. The same is true for Joseph and the shepherds; the Divine has intruded radically into their previously ordinary lives. Suddenly, unexpectedly, and yes, strangely, nothing is as it had always been.

Sound familiar? Six weeks ago, delegates gathered for Convention at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and joyfully welcomed Grace Episcopal Church, Ossining as a new parish of the Diocese. Twelve days ago, on a gleaming Sunday morning, our bishop was visiting with us at the St. Paul’s campus, leading a spirited and uplifting service of Confirmation and Reception. There was a hopeful sense that things were returning to something like normal. We celebrated with a special coffee hour. The bishop took your clergy out to lunch.

Tonight, on Christmas Eve, the Cathedral is streaming its service without an in-person congregation, and after tonight, we will be doing the same for at least a month. It’s so disorienting, so strange, so unexpected. It all happened so fast. And in these ways, this Christmas Eve night is quite like that first Christmas night.

And we are all pondering...mulling...wondering. We've been through one very long haul already. Are we facing another one? What will this one be like? Is it safe to visit our families? Where is God in all of this? What sort of Christmas is this? The literal meaning of that Greek word *symballo* is not so far off the mark here; it feels like the best we can do is to "throw it together." There's no roadmap and no manual for this!

All of that is true enough. Yet there is reason to cling to hope that this Christmas conforms to the Gospel story of the first Christmas more closely than any Christmas in our lifetimes. Do you remember how Mary felt when the angel Gabriel first appeared to her? She was *afraid*. Likewise, the shepherds, when the angel appeared, and the glory of the Lord shone around them: they were *terrified*. If we leave out the fear that accompanied God's sudden intrusions into the ordinary lives of our Christmas cast of characters, we really do miss the fulness of the story. These Divine intrusions were terrifying; and God's response was, "*Do not be afraid.*" (Luke 2:10). And then God pointed them towards a child, a baby, lying in a manger, who would save them.

It all turned out to be true. The baby lying on the hay that fed the cattle would become the One who brought the bread of life to all the world. This is as true in the midst of the frightening intrusion we are experiencing now as it was during the stories of the Christmas Gospel. Remember that when the angels proclaimed good news in the Christmas Gospel stories, the news was not that everything would be as it was before; everything would be, in fact, unimaginably different. Yes, peace on earth was promised; but remember that when Jews heard "peace" they thought "*shalom*," and *shalom* means wholeness, completion—a peace that can come only after injustice and oppression are disrupted and eliminated. The baby in the manger would indeed grow to show the world the way to God's *shalom*. But his followers would learn that the powers of this world would do all in their power to prevent that *shalom* from becoming a reality.

Reinhold Niebuhr famously said that the task of the Church is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." (*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*) This is indeed a strange, unexpected, uncomfortable Christmas Eve night. But so was the first Christmas night. May our discomfort this night remind us that the work of bringing God's *shalom* is not done. May it remind us that we are called to continue the work of the One who was born this night. In the words of the Letter to Titus, may it remind us that we are called by our Lord this night to be "people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." (Titus 2:14) In this zeal we will find not comfort, but joy—and the peace that passes all understanding.

Christmas blessings to you all.