

Christmas 2015

Dear Family and Friends:

RV often drifts off to sleep while Dottie practices the piano for church services and a variety of other musical events. Of late, the song of choice is “Mary, Did You Know.” It’s a poignant piece that asks “Mary did you know that your baby boy ...” and fills out each line by referencing events in the Lord’s public ministry or with statements of his identity as God’s Son and our Redeemer. Thinking of that first Christmas from Mary’s standpoint highlights how our current holiday celebrations contrast with the starkness of the Gospel accounts.

Christmas cards portray the holy family as blissfully serene with other worldly halos hovering above their heads. Others portray Mary placidly receiving the tidings of the Annunciation. In contrast, the Gospel accounts have her nonplused—“but, but I’m a virgin!” The angel’s presence was frightening, and his news was not entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning. Joseph graciously decides to divorce Mary privately rather than disgrace her by pressing public charges until an angel shows up to clarify his perception of the matter. The consternation this event caused was heartrending.

Mary’s donkey ride over a less than gentle Palestinian countryside, nine months pregnant and due any moment, would not have resembled a horse-drawn sleigh gliding over a New England landscape buried in glimmering white snow under a silvery moon. All those cute animals nestled in our nativity scenes—no way. Adjust that picture to pungent, filthy sheep providing ample olfactory evidence of that “fresh country air.” The grand, exquisitely adorned residences, radiantly illuminated, were conspicuously absent. Jesus was born in a stable or a cave far from home, with no midwife, extended family, or a gossip village present.

The gatherings around sumptuously laden tables draped with fine linens to celebrate the arrival of family and friends give way to something far more sinister. The Bible records a notorious incident of state-sponsored terrorism. Herod, Rome’s client king in Palestine, killed all the children under two in the Bethlehem locale to eliminate this newborn king. Jesus’ family was on the road again, this time as refugees fleeing to the distant land of Egypt. Those picturesque shots of the proud mama beaming over her divine newborn also fall short of actuality. Rather, an old man in the temple, Simeon by name, while holding Jesus, recognized who was present and what was at stake. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.” He predicted Mary would experience profound sorrow. Some thirty years later, she would stand helplessly by while her crucified son pulled himself painfully up a splintery cross for another gasp of air as, in agony, his bodily functions shut down one by one.

We have no desire to trim back on pleasant traditions that we so enjoy. However, it is sobering to realize how our celebratory customs gloss over the harsher reality of what we commemorate. Mary did you know? She had some inkling, but after the angel Gabriel’s visit, she knew her life was about to change significantly.

Years ago, C.S. Lewis wrote of God’s plan to visit this planet: “The whole thing narrows and narrows to a little point, small as a point of a spear—a Jewish teen at her prayers. Mary, did you know? How

could she have known? Think of it—an angel appears to a poor teenage girl who then got pregnant without having sex and traveled on horseback many miles to a poor village on the distant outskirts of a far-flung empire where she spent the night in an animal shelter or a cave delivering a baby who turned out to be the Son of God and Savior of the world.

Do you really believe that? Yes, we do and so much more! He was born to die for you and me and our haggard generation, living in a world full of irrational terrorism and hopeless quandaries, and needing a Savior more than any other generation ever has. This newborn struggling to work never-before-used lungs was indeed “the image of the invisible God, the preeminent one over all creation.” Amazing!

From our home to yours—Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.