

Life Changes
by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.” — Luke 2:19.

There was a banging on the door. “I’ll get it!” shouted Naomi, weaving her way among the group of travelers gathered at the inn. Of course, she always was the one to ‘get it’ here. There was no one else. Her husband had been dead for five years.

The town was commonly called the City of David. She wondered from where the term ‘city’ had come since it was clearly not a city.

Her children had moved— Nazareth, Caesarea, Jerusalem— bigger venues. Since it would have been hard for her to keep up the small farm she and her husband operated on this tiny patch of land by herself she decided to turn the house into an inn.

Only a generous soul would see this ramshackle house as a fit place to stay. But then a cadre of Roman soldiers— the occupying army— decided they needed a place when they came through this tiny village three or four times a year. They chose this house as being ideal since they thought it would not draw attention to their presence.

Naomi knew the ways of the world, knew what she was doing. She overcharged the Romans. That paid the upkeep on the place for the entire year.

Then because of this census thing people flocked to Bethlehem in droves. Right now, there was no room in the house for another soul. It would be a very good year.

The banging on the door persisted until Naomi opened it. Introductions were made. A man, his name was Joseph, and a very pregnant woman, her name was Mary, stood there. They were in town for the census.

Naomi thought she detected some fear in Mary’s eyes. He had kind eyes and spoke softly. “We have been on the road for days. We need someplace to stay.” Then he stated the obvious. “My wife is with child. The baby might be born anytime now.”

Naomi thought quickly. There was no room for them in the house. And if the woman’s time came she would need to be alone, not with a crowd. It was still early in the Spring. But the edge had come off winter. [1]

“I have no room inside. Follow me. I think I can put you up in the barn.”

She brushed past them not seeing if they agreed or disagreed but follow they did. What choice did they have? They had tried everywhere else in town.

There were some animals in the barn— a cow, a couple of chickens, several sheep— left over from the working farm. But many stalls were empty. There was plenty of hay, more than enough to put together a makeshift place to sleep— or to bear a child— in an empty stall.

“Look— make a place to lay down. I’ll be back,” said Naomi and scurried off.

“I can’t thank you enough,” the man called after the innkeeper as she disappeared.

Naomi guessed the child would be born shortly. She sprinted to the house, found a bucket, ran to the well, tied a rope on the handle and tossed it down the shaft.

She heard it splash, guided the rope back and forth until she felt there was enough water to make retrieving the bucket practical. She tugged the load to the surface and headed back to the barn.

As she approached she was surprised to hear the cry of an infant. In her short time away Mary had given birth.

Joseph must have acted with resourcefulness and haste. Clean hay was neatly spread out in one of the stalls. Mary sat there, cradled in the arms of Joseph, a crying baby cradled in her arms.

Naomi approached. In her straightforward, matter of fact way she said, "O.K. Let's do what we have to do."

She dipped a towel into the bucket of water and began washing the child who was in Mary's arms. Joseph looked on.

Naomi looked at him. "You do realize your whole life has now changed."

Joseph nodded. His eyes now showed the same kind of fear Naomi had detected in the eyes of Mary.

The crying of the baby got still louder as the infant was washed. "Don't worry," said Naomi responding to what she saw, what she perceived, in Joseph. "From the amount of noise this baby is making I think we have a very healthy child here."

"I understand that," said Joseph nodding in affirmation. "I am not worried on that count. I am worried about the world this child has just entered. Our journey here took five days. The length of the trip was not the arduous part."

"The roads are infested with brigands, thieves— that's dangerous. The Roman Army of occupation— that's dangerous. Our leaders seem incompetent— that's dangerous. The child does not frighten me. The world we live in... that frightens me."

Naomi simply nodded. "We may be a small town but we have a wise Rabbi. He once said to me life is a journey through changes. As life changes it is often dangerous, often frightening. But tomorrow it will be different. You will be different. And life will present you with other different, frightening, dangerous challenges."

"Me, personally, my husband died five years ago. My children left. I could not maintain the farm alone. So I started the inn. Life changed; I changed."

"Life changes. It's a given. You need to change with it."

"You now have this child. As I said, your life will change completely. Indeed, that same Rabbi also said we need to live life understanding the promise God makes. The promise God makes is to love us, to covenant with us, be with us, to walk with us, walk at our side."

Reaching out to Mary Naomi said, "Give me the child."

She held the baby up. The baby stopped crying. She looked deeply into the infant's eyes. Then she handed the

child to Joseph. “What do you see?”

“I see love.”

Naomi took the child and handed the child to Mary. “What do you see?”

“I see love.”

“That same Rabbi told me the covenant starts with love. When you look in the eyes of a baby you see nothing but love. This child shall see many changes in a lifetime. But God *will* love, covenant, be with and walk with this child through every change.”

Naomi took the child from Mary, held the child in her arms and again looked into the eyes of the infant. “The Rabbi told me God loves us so much a Messiah will be sent at some point. Now that... that will be a real change— the Messiah— loving, present, covenanting, walking with us.

Who knows? This child... *this child*... might even be the Messiah.” (Slight pause.) Amen.

12/24/2017 — Christmas Eve

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Response and Benediction. This is a précis of what was said: “We live in a very secular world. Hence, I never wish people a ‘Merry Christmas.’ That’s a secular term. As an alternative I’ve often, therefore, suggested that we wish one another a ‘Happy Christmas.’ But I want to make a different suggestion. If somebody says to you ‘Merry Christmas,’ or ‘Happy Christmas’ say to them ‘Christ is with us.’ That is the real Christian sentiment expressed in the Feast of the Incarnation— Christ is with us.”

BENEDICTION: The sun shall no longer be / your light by day, / nor for brightness shall the moon / give you light by night; / for *Yahweh*, God, / will be your everlasting light, / and your glory. — Isaiah 60:19-20a.

[1] At the beginning of this Christmas Eve the pastor gave brief offered some background about the reality of the Christmas celebration. This included the fact that many scholars think Jesus was born in what we would call the Fourth Century B.C.E., probably in the Spring and not the winter.