

God Whispers

by Rev. Joe Connolly

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

The journey from Nazareth had been long and hard. The trip took about eight days. The two of them and a pack animal had traveled over the hills and winding roads of Roman Palestine. Mostly they walked.

Mary was pregnant so occasionally— when fatigue or simply when surges of pain happened— occasionally walking was out of the question. But they could not stop. They needed to get to the City of David by a certain date to register, to be in compliance.

And so at those times when Mary needed to ride, her husband found a good sized bolder on the side of the road, helped her up and nestled the mule— an incredibly patient beast— next to the stone. Using the rock as a platform Mary would then carefully climb on the animal’s back.

And yes, there was noise along the road— a lot of it. They had not expected much company on the journey. They were wrong. Roman soldiers, both marching and riding in chariots, were also navigating these treacherous roads.

If the soldiers did not actually have the right of way, they took it. They were, after all, an occupying army.

And they made noise, a lot of it. Commanders barked orders. Chariots creaked. Soldiers cursed. Hooves pounded. Horses and pack animals seemed to bray constantly.

And then there were the people, hundreds of them, people with families, people in wagons, people riding, people walking, people making noise who, like Mary and Joseph, were headed to Bethlehem. Why were there so many?

The decree from the Roman Emperor declared everyone had to return to the place, the town, from which they claimed lineage. Joseph was a descendant of the house, the lineage of David. David was, of course, the great ruler of Israel, the one from whose lineage the prophets predicted the Messiah would be born.

Joseph had a suspicion as to why so many people were going to Bethlehem. Many people wanted to claim they were of David’s lineage were making the trip. Claim was the key word.

People wanted to claim a relationship with David. But were all these people really of David’s lineage? It seemed unlikely.

However, once they registered that relationship to David with the Roman government who would question it? Having that credential made the claim real even if it was not.

Indeed, when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem the town was packed. There was no place for them to stay.

And so they landed in a stable, in a barn. And that was noisy. There were all kinds of animal noises... and smells, all kinds of animal smells... and it was uncomfortable. Joseph gathered hay in a pile to make a place for Mary to lay down.

Just when she had settled into the hay her time arrived. Now it was she who made noise. And it was loud. She

was loud. But the labor was short.

It was then the turn of the infant to make noise. This was her firstborn. She had not realized how loud a child could be. The noise hurt her ears. But this was her child. So she loved the noise.

Nearly right away there was even more noise— shepherds, boys— all very young— excited as only young boys can be, burst into the barn. She did not understand what they were talking about.

They said things about the glory of God and angels and good news and they went on and on and on. They shouted, they pointed to the sky and they pointed at the child. It did not make any sense. And then they ran away as quickly as they had come.

So finally, it was just Mary and her husband and the child alone in the barn. Joseph sighed and sat next to Mary and the infant. At least her husband was not noisy, she thought. He was, most of the time, taciturn.

Just as quickly as Joseph sat, he stood. “We are both hungry. I should go to the inn and talk to that innkeeper. Perhaps I can get some food.”

Mary smiled, nodded ascent. And he was gone. Mary sighed and held the child next to her breast. The crying stopped. In a short time she could feel the steady tempo of the slumber, the warmth of breath against her skin.

She suddenly realized noise had been a constant companion to her for days. But now there was no noise. It was strangely quiet.

The quiet surrounded her, enfolded her, embraced her. She felt warmed by it, comforted by it, blessed by it.

The silence gave her time to think. She reflected on the events of the last months, the tumult, the excitement. Of course, there was that... vision. Then there was the trip to see Elizabeth, the betrothal to Joseph, the pregnancy, the hard journey to Bethlehem.

As was her habit, she tried to understand the place to which God might be calling her. Perhaps because of that vision, the one she experienced, she had recently spoken with her Rabbi and asked what the voice of God might sound like.

“The voice of God has nothing to do with noise,” said the Rabbi. “We humans seem to like chaos. We seem to like noise. Noise is what humans make, not God.”

“The prophet Elijah,” he continued, “stood on a mountain before God. God was not in the earthquake, the wind, the fire. God was in sheer silence.” (Slight pause.)

Mary lifted the cover under which she and the child rested and looked down. The child opened its eyes and looked at her. (Slight pause.)

Mary *heard* the voice of God. The voice of God was not loud. The voice of God spoke softly, gently, quietly... in a whisper.

Mary *heard* the voice of God whisper in the eyes of the child. One word was spoken softly, gently, quietly... in a whisper. Love— *love*. (Slight pause.)

Mary pondered this in her heart. She wondered what it meant that the voice of God could be heard in eyes of this child. She wondered what it meant— that the voice of God said only one word: love. Amen.

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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 Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “We live in a very secular world. Hence, I never wish people a ‘Merry Christmas.’ That is a secular term. You see, as Christians at Eastertide we should not greet people with ‘Happy Easter.’ We should say, ‘Christ is risen.’ So, at Christmastide, if somebody says ‘Merry Christmas,’ as a Christian say ‘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.