

Do you get the *Ken Mawr Chronicle*? If you do, you are receiving the most popular newsletter on earth. Well, the most popular *church newsletter* on earth. Okay, it’s definitely the most popular church newsletter *coming out of McKees Rocks*, written by a slightly overweight, but youngish looking grandpa. As the editor of this incredibly popular newsletter, I get a lot of emails. Most aren’t too surprising. There are the usual messages from readers saying they’re naming their children after me. (By the way, “Karl” makes a beautiful name for a boy. Or a girl, if you simply add the letter “a” or “y”).

When other people read our newsletter they tell me how it has revolutionized their ministry. Well, not exactly, but Pittsburgh Presbytery’s head guy did write to me last December to say how he liked the way I explained the meaning of Advent. That’s true. Another pastor recently informed me that he’s changing the name of his church to “McDonald Presbyterian Church.” Never mind that a church by that name has been in McDonald, PA since 1885, long before I could even crawl.

But last week I did receive a call from a real reader. It was a woman who wanted me to know that she thought I was wise, funny and handsome. I called back and said to the woman: “Thanks, mom.”

When I was a boy, Christmas seemed so much simpler. Every year the youth group would go out caroling—heading out to visit older members of the congregation and maybe a nursing home before returning to the church for cocoa and cookies. My mom would jot down her gift plans on a notepad by the telephone where we kids would sometimes find it. All the kids in our Sunday School got a fresh orange and a big Hershey chocolate bar before Christmas and, if I was lucky, I would get to help pass out the goodies.

The bulk of my extended family on the McDonald side was fairly close—both emotionally and geographically—so the whole clan would gather for Christmas dinner and to exchange presents, usually sometime between Christmas and New Year. There were various tasty treats. My Uncle Bob’s specialty was chocolate fudge and my Aunt Ruth’s was homemade popcorn balls, the kind that stick to your teeth.

But, as I grew into adulthood, Christmas changed. I generally do everything I can to avoid the nutty shopping days that lead up to Christmas. I did work for JC Penney one year at Christmastime. Yikes! Pity the poor folks who work retail at this time of the year. But now, as a pastor, I cannot help but associate the season with preparations for extra services and all the rest of the activities.

Additionally, the secular world creeps in with its constant advertisements—which appear earlier every year—and the crass consumerism of the season. There are financial pressures, personal commitments, worship responsibilities, travel demands, decorations to hang, and a house to clean—uh, I mean help to clean. Sometimes I find myself wishing the season would just be over before it has even begun! But I think that that blending of Christmas *joy* and *burden* began well before I ever experienced it.

Imagine what it must have been like for Mary. Picture spring in ancient Israel. The wildflowers are beginning to bloom since the “rainy season” has come and gone (maybe a scant four to five inches of precipitation). A pot bubbles over a cooking fire while a young woman goes about her evening chores, humming a song to herself as she ponders her recent engagement and the adventures to come. Without warning, a light appears. We always associate a light with the appearance of the divine, don’t we? But

what kind? A flash? A sustained low-level glow? The raw glory of the Almighty illuminating from an angelic messenger? What sounds would she have heard? The tinkling of bells? A cosmic hum? Choirs? Trumpets? Thunder? Utter stillness and complete silence?

Whatever it was like for Mary, Gabriel has arrived and he has pronounced to her that all of her earlier dreams are irrevocably changed. He pronounces there is no choice involved, no opportunity to weigh the importance of what has been foretold. There is both joy and burden in being called by God, even if it is always a blessing.

I can't help think that a more realistic interpretation of her words, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*" wasn't delivered so much with an unshakable voice and steely resolve but with something more like swallowed panic and nervous uncertainty. Wasn't her voice trying not to break under the incredible strain it is being put through?

What does she do when the angel leaves? What is she feeling? I don't actually believe that it's like the medieval paintings or popular images. I don't picture her calmly going about the rest of her evening, content and serene. She is a pregnant, betrothed, teenage girl. Her mind must be racing with questions. And filled with fears! "How will I tell Joseph? Will he leave me? What will my family say? Will anyone believe me? What will happen to me? Will I be hurt? Will I be killed? How do I raise a child? I am but a child!"

Even if none of these thoughts is present, she is still carrying the Son of God in her womb. I picture her sitting in stunned silence, softly crying, desperately trying to put the pieces of her life back together.

At this point in Luke, Mary leaves her home to visit her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. It's tempting to think that this is some sort of "mission of mercy" on Mary's part, that she's gone to help her expectant kin. But I don't buy that for a moment. She made the trip from Nazareth to a town in Judea to give herself time to process everything that had just happened.

When Mary arrives, Elizabeth was six months pregnant. We know this because Gabriel says so in verse 36. Mary stays there for three months, then leaves right before the birth. Now, I've never been pregnant, but I've been by my wife's side through two deliveries. And while having people around before the birth was helpful, it was the folks that were there after the birth that truly made the difference. And that's why I firmly believe Mary went to go see Elizabeth for Mary's own sake, not Elizabeth's. She doesn't do that unless Gabriel's announcement has thrown her off balance and she could use some counsel.

But again, the story doesn't end there. When Elizabeth pronounced that Mary was "blessed among women," something changed. Mary began to experience her role in a new way, to accept it as part of her. She came to realize that God didn't just appear to her, but that God was with her, both in her pregnancy and in her life to come. Her life had a meaning beyond her comprehension. The task for which she was chosen was more than just a burden to be weathered. Traditional images of Mary are meaningful for many of us, but they frequently overlook how vulnerable she must have felt at the annunciation. We can learn a great deal from her example—not only in her willingness to follow God's call—but also in her very certain fears and doubts.

Suppose you grew up in a nice house in a nice neighborhood—a warm, welcoming, and orderly place. Years later you return to the house. Your family is still there, but something terrible has happened. Instead of order, you find chaos. Garbage is heaped up in the corners of the rooms. Nothing in the house seems to work. Those who live there are sullen and nasty to each other.

Something like this has happened to the human race. We started out in a lush garden, but now we live in a disorderly, dysfunctional world. We find garbage heaped in the corners. Violence is rampant. We are tempted to sing, “This world is not my home.” But indeed it is. And we need someone to set it right.

One day the Prince slips in, incognito, or nearly so. For the most part, the world fails to recognize him, but those who have been trained to see the clues find him. Mary is one such person, but because the Savior still walks among us, we too can see him, if only we know where to look.

So where do we look? Mary’s song in verses 46-55 is full of clues. Look among the poor, among those who have little, among those who suffer. In Advent we redirect our sight from the illusions that cover up the sad truth of the human race to the places and people among whom Jesus walks, and for whom the Son of the Most High has come. In her song Mary glorified the Lord and rejoiced in God her Savior. The Mighty One had done great things for her.

Now there’s the miracle of Christmas: the Incarnation of God made flesh for our sake and for our deliverance. When heaven came back it was nothing short of miraculous.

And in addition to that, the miracle of Christmas narrated in Luke chapter 1 that focuses on Mary is a reminder to all of us that God used a humble human being to make that reality possible, and that today God continues to work through people—simple, everyday people, like us.

You know how I said (tongue in cheek) that in response to a call about the Ken Mawr Chronicle, our church newsletter, a woman told me she thought I was wise, funny and handsome? So I called the woman and said, “Thanks mom.”

I have a hunch that Jesus said the exact same thing to a woman from Nazareth many, many times. When he said, “Thanks mom,” he was speaking to a remarkable, brave and faithful child of God named Mary.

It is our joy to be a child of God and it is our burden as well. But it is always a blessing. Amen.