

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
Numbers 6: 22-27 Psalm 67 Galatians 4: 4-7 Luke 2: 16-21
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

This is a very familiar scene in Christian art—the shepherds at the manger with the Christ child, Mary and Joseph. I see it not only in churches and chapels, but walking by store windows in Manhattan when I visit home for the holidays. It is so simple, picturesque and tranquil. But artists through the ages and modern commercial artists as well, have tamed the truth of the scene. The story notes that Mary reflected in her heart on the things she heard from the shepherds. We join in her reflection on the significance of these events.

What brought about this scene, a child birth away from both home and family support? This Jewish couple was subject, as so many families are today, to decisions “from on high.” Remember how Luke’s gospel for Christmas midnight began (Luke 2:1), “In those days a decree went out...” The Roman emperor issues an edict for a census to collect taxes and a pregnant couple at the outskirts of the empire have no choice but obey. The couple have become, like so many through the world, displaced for a while (or permanently) because of state policy, civil war, political persecution and economic oppression. They remind us too of our own city streets and shelters where so many have taken refuge, among them, pregnant women. We reflect on how national and local economic policies adversely affect the most vulnerable in our society. This gives us something to ponder as the campaign season heats up and we listen to politicians’ campaign promises.

On this feast of Mary, we realize she stands with the world’s displaced and vulnerable. The store windows may romanticize this scene, even make it look attractive—but we can’t. A stable or cave is no place for a woman to give birth. A manger for animal food is not where any mother wants to place her newborn. Imagine what must have been running through Mary’s mind. Imagine her distress. Not a grand entrance for the messiah into our world! Rather, he entered with his parents through the world’s back door where the beggars and outsiders are huddled.

The previous gospel section gives the account of Jesus’ birth. One can only

imagine Mary's exhaustion. Now, as the shepherds arrive and relate the message they received from the angels, Mary enters into an internal labor, reflecting on the meaning of the events. The Greek word used here suggests mulling something over, or putting together pieces of a puzzle to make a full picture. Mary has to continue throughout her life working on the meaning of the angel's message to her. She is trying to do what we do when things happen that we only partially understand. We invite Mary to stand with us in prayer as we mull over certain things in our lives that confuse us or leave us puzzled. We ask her to help us remain faithful even when the pieces don't come together to make a clear picture. We invite the Spirit that overshadowed Mary to gift us with understanding, patience and courage so that we do not give up on what may now befuddle us.

In the first reading from Numbers, God instructs Moses how the people are to be blessed. What the reading shows is that God wants just that for us—a blessing. Our God is not one who wants to lay heavy burdens on us, test our faith, push us to the limits—or do whatever hard things we often attribute to God. Rather, the revelation to the Israelites at this key moment in their history, and to us, is that God is gracious and looks kindly on us and wants to give us peace. Not exactly the harsh stereotype we often hear spouted about the infamous “Old Testament God!”

Jesus is the Numbers' reading made flesh. He is the concrete manifestation of God's good inclinations towards us. In Jesus, God has blessed us and turned a shining face towards us. Jesus is God's “kindly” look upon us. God has always been on our side; Jesus is the full assurance of that. Isn't it awkward to meet someone we have met before and whose name we have forgotten or gotten wrong? Or, to be with a person we haven't met and not be introduced? In Jesus, God has revealed a name to us, one that assures us we are on a “first-name basis” with God. (“So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites and I will bless them.”) We call on that name and in doing so, know that we have a special relationship with God because of what Jesus has done for humanity.

Perhaps we feel distant from God, or our lives are not going well and we wonder if God is off on holiday and forgotten about us. Or worse, we may think that God is punishing us for some past wrong, or testing us. These states of confusion and fear can compound our difficulties and leave us overwhelmed. Where is God in our mess? Well, we have been given a name we can call upon ---Jesus--- who is

God's face turned with concern in our direction. In him, God "look(s) upon you kindly and give(s) you peace." Jesus is the expansion of Moses' blessing over the Israelites and we believe that in Jesus, all people's have been blessed.

We join Mary as she ponders and reflects in her heart on the wonderful things God has done in Jesus for us. Think of the consequences of God's acts on our behalf. God has taken our flesh, walked our earth and swept us up into loving arms. In Jesus a blessing has been said over us and a new name given us. We are outsiders and aliens no more. In Jesus' name we are blessed, brought in and called children of God. Many of us have made new year's resolutions about exercise, weight loss, or being kinder, more patient and loving. Mary's response to what was happening around her should encourage us to make a resolution to do what she did. Her example invites us to take a step backwards from the rush of our lives in order to ponder who we are; where we are going and how well we are doing on our journey. This eucharist might be just the occasion to begin that process of reflection as we invoke the blessing Jesus's name brings to us.

I write this on the anniversary of the first flight by the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. We here in North Carolina have heard about the planing for this event for over a year. Today a replica of the original plane tried to fly and failed. Too bad, there were a lot of very important people there for the occasion. The president flew in on "Air Force One" and other guests included astronauts, famous pilots and captains of the aviation industry. One would expect such a gathering for this important event. Important people show up for newsworthy spectacles.

So—who showed up for the birth of the messiah? Where were the presidents, kings, queens, the "movers and the shakers?" The usual luminaries were preoccupied and distracted by their important concerns that day. Even the religious leaders, who should have been attuned to God's unusual workings, missed what was happening. People who might have gained from being there, politicians and local celebrities just didn't show up. They never got the invitation. Fame and fortune don't get you to the place where new life is found. Instead, your faith invites you and faith accompanies you there. You make the trip because you have a need that isn't met by the usual things that satisfy most people. Maybe you are weary of a world stained with suffering, war, depression, fear, greed, torture, terror, sickness and sadness and you hunger for peace and a light in the darkness.

Maybe you are looking to start all over again, or to energize a lagging faith. If any of these describe you—receive the invitation and enter the story. Arrive with the shepherds in haste from the outer darkness. Look and see the one God sent to us who is God- with-us, in a babe. Feel quite at home, no matter how inadequate your reputation or accomplishments. Let the hillside shepherds, still smelling of sheep and fields and the poor Jewish parents, reassure you—“here you are welcome; here is your true home.” The most unlikely people find a home here today. Ponder that with Mary as she reflects on all these things “in her heart.”

QUOTABLE

MARY, MARY

*What else did the Angel tell you?
While you nurtured his message
And pondered the wild potential
Of a womb, did you envision those
Who would come after, the generations
That would Balkanize your heart,
Stamp your image on their banners
And lead you into battle;
That the wind would carry your name
From a German Soldier's lips
As he lay dying on the Eastern front,
A Polish captain would wear your medal
Up the heights of Monte Cassino?
Do you grow weary of false sightings
And forced tears, the rote of rosaries,
The bargains of Novenas?*

*Oh, Lady O Guadalupe,
Madonna of Czestochowa,
Queen of Patriarchs,
Mystical Rose,
Do you sometimes long to cry out
To the complaining Daughters of Eve,
To the rapacious Sons of Adam:
“Stop, Be silent. Listen, Hear me.*

*I'm Miriam, the Jewish girl from Nazareth
Who said 'yes' to life."*

By Alice Tarnowski, in *The Christian Century*

JUSTICE NOTES

WE WANT LAND ON EARTH

We are the people of a nation
We are the people of God
We want land on earth
We already have it in heaven

—by Pedro Casaldaliga, Bishop of Sao Felix, Brazil

Dom Pedro scratched this single stanza of poetry on the back of a banana leaf in the Amazon forest with the point of a pocket knife. A bishop working with the poor, he knew the social tragedy of the people losing their land to drought, displacement and the domination of colonization.

The poem has since become the rallying cry of millions of landless peasant families.

(Source unknown)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Eric Queen #0544664 (On death row since 4/11/00)

Francisco E. Tirado #0684814 (4/11/00)

Mark Squires #0688223 (5/17/00)

Christina Walters #0626944 (7/6/00)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP , Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,
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