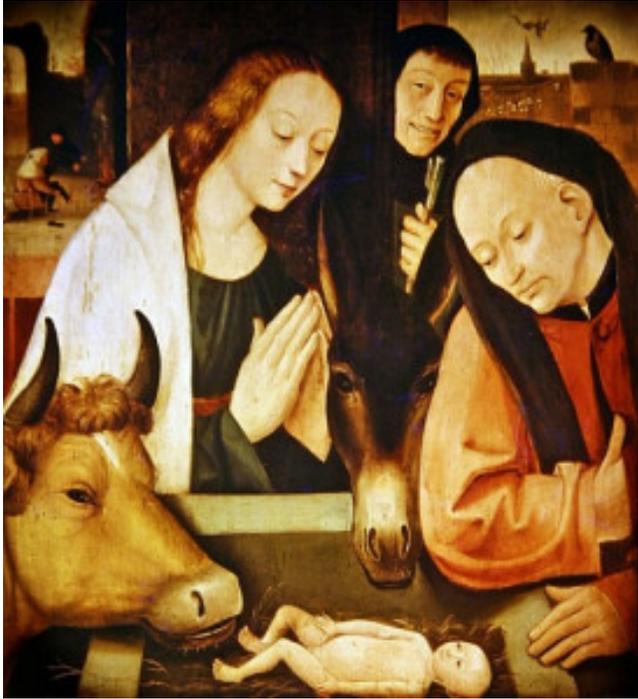


## So Weird: Meditation for 4th Advent/Christmas Sunday



*Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:8-18*

In our house, when I was growing up, the baby Jesus didn't appear in the manger until after we got back from Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. We were strict constructionists—no carols in Advent, and no baby in the cradle 'till the night he was born.

But that was just about the only biblically correct thing about our crèche. Remember the part in the Bible where it says that a large fuzzy spider crawled along Joseph's shoulder? No? Well, there was a large fuzzy spider in our manger scene anyway. And an angel in a tutu wearing big clown sneakers straddling the roofline of the barn. And a little model Ferrari Hot Wheels car parked next to the camels. And a purple wind-up turtle that spit water on the Virgin Mary's head.

When you have a child in the house and you've put the crèche on a low table, a purple turtle is not the weirdest thing that's likely to show up to adore the Child.

But then, all the characters in the Christmas story have a touch of weird about them. Take the angel Gabriel. He's scary. Every time he appears in the Bible, he says, 'Don't be afraid!' You don't have to say, "Don't be afraid!" if nobody's scared. Gabriel has to say it all the time. That's because he scares people. You'd be scared too if a bright pulsating creature with ginormous wings dropped in on you out of the blue. Even if he were to appear as an ordinary person, which angels sometimes do, he'd still be a strange guy you don't know—in your house.

Then there's Mary. After Gabriel calms her down ('Don't be afraid, Mary!'), he tells her that God has decided she should have a miraculously conceived baby who will be the son of God and a king with an endless reign... and would that be okay with her? In one of the greatest understatements of the Bible, Mary is said to have been 'perplexed' by this. Perplexed? That's what you are when you're looking at an unusually high electric bill, not when you're being informed of a virginal conception. Mary also 'ponders.' We're told she meditates on everything that's happening. *While* it's happening. Giving birth in a livestock shed in the dead of winter, she's pondering. Smelly animals nose around her newborn, she's pondering. Angels play trumpets overhead, shepherds with garlic breath crowd her personal space, and she 'ponders all these things in her heart.' Mary ponders. You and I would be hysterical.

And Joseph. Silent Joseph. He says nothing at all from his first appearance in the biblical record until he disappears altogether, sometime after Jesus turns twelve. Not a syllable. He probably didn't have time to talk. Angels were always interrupting his sleep. He kept having to load up the donkey at a moment's notice. Off to Bethlehem. Off to Egypt. Back again. Without a GPS. Maybe he was just too worn out to say anything.

And the shepherds. You want them in your Christmas carols and on your greeting cards, but not in your house. They tramp in all that ... manure. And they are known to have sticky fingers. Count the silver when they leave. You'll be missing a few forks and the soup spoon.

No, the purple turtle isn't the oddest character in the crèche. They're all a touch strange. But it's probably a good thing for us that they are.

If Gabriel had been a pudgy-cheeked cherub who never made anybody nervous, we might not have known that it's good for us to be scared by the Holy every now and then. To tremble before an awesome God. We sing about being scared— 'Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.' But when was the last time you actually shook in God's presence, or hid your face before God's holiness, or begged God to go away and leave you alone, or stood mute before God's power in the world, in someone else's life, or in your own? The last time the world suddenly became a lot larger than you thought? Deeper and more mysterious than anybody thought? When your certainties vanished? When you fell to your knees?

And if Mary hadn't done so much pondering, we might not have realized just how much there *is* to ponder in the way our lives unfold. How much mystery is tucked into life's smallest details. How available God is to us on the ground, in the stuff of being human. If Mary doesn't show us how to ponder, we might never hold some seemingly insignificant experience up to the light, turn it 'round and 'round like a prism, and discover there, in every facet of mess and glory, the presence and activity of God.

And if Joseph hadn't been so silent, so retiring, we might not have seen how silly it is always to want to have something clever or wise to say, to interject something about everything, to be the center of attention in every conversation. If he isn't silent, we might not discover how liberating it is to have no *need* to comment, no compulsion to be heard, no urge to intrude upon a drama and steal a scene. We might miss a chance to notice how seldom we hold back and make room for someone else to be seen and heard, or how much we need to have someone make that space of dignity for us. If Joseph had been a chatterbox, his son Jesus might not have developed that beautiful capacity of his just to let things be. Jesus might not have disappeared to hilltops at night to be still and listen to God and catch the sounds of human suffering and hope rising from below. Maybe it was the example of Joseph's silence that kept Jesus from being provoked when, bloody and accused, he stood before Pilate and the crowd. Maybe Joseph's relinquishment of the need to be a Somebody enabled his Child to stand before the powers of the world and, in his infinite self-possession, vanquish them, without uttering a single self-defensive word.

And if it weren't for the stinky, shifty shepherds, some people might think they have to spiff up to go to the manger and meet God. They might never go at all if they think it requires clean hands, trendy clothes, a spotless conscience. They might miss the chance to know the God who welcomes everybody who comes, even and especially the odd and undesirable. Welcomes everybody and everything who comes for whatever reason, even if it's to try to steal the silver. Without shepherds we might never come to love this God who doesn't seem to mind being taken advantage of. Who would hand over the whole treasure to us in a heartbeat. Who *does* hand it over to us in the life of a Child. Who never demands a thing in return except that we hand ourselves over to each other in mercy, justice, and love.

In my family's crèche there was a spider crawling on Joseph, a Ferrari parked next to the camels, an angel in sneakers perched on the roof, and a plastic turtle, purple and proud, spitting water on Mary's head. It was a weird scene. But then, so is my life. And so is yours. And so is the world's.

And, the Story goes, for some unfathomable reason—call it love—God can't resist joining us in our weirdness. And so, the Story goes, the Word became flesh and lived among us. And because he became all that we are, weird and wonderful, nothing that we are is out of bounds at his cradle. Nothing and no one. Not you, not me, not purple plastic turtle.

Odd as that is. Strange as it seems.