

## Christmas Eve B (12/24/2017)

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

**Luke 2:1-20**

*Motherhood is a formidable thing. Mothers are uniquely acquainted with the privilege and burden of loving children. That God entrusts Mary with Jesus testifies to her courage and faithfulness. And, Mary's attentiveness to Jesus reflects God's mothering care for all of God's beloved children. This Christmas, God grant us each a heart like hers, that we might also bear God to the world in our time and place.*

If you want something taken care of, entrust it to a mother. Mothers know how to get things done. Think of the time and energy, the wisdom and savvy, the patience and resilience required of mothers. Is there any more significant work than mothering? Consider just a few reflections. From businesswoman Nita Ambani: "Motherhood is the most challenging as well as the utmost satisfying vocation in this world." From novelist Barbara Kingsolver: "Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws." From satirist P.J. O'Rourke: "Each child is biologically required to have a mother. Fatherhood is a well-regarded theory, but motherhood is a fact." And, from poet Robert Browning: "Motherhood: all love begins and ends there."<sup>1</sup>

There's no question that **motherhood is a formidable thing. Mothers are uniquely acquainted with the privilege and burden of loving children.** So are fathers, of course, as we bear the responsibility to share equitably in the task of nurturing. But this Christmas Eve, I want to lift up mothers and mother figures.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/motherhood>.

One mother in particular comes to mind – Mary, a poor teenager from a backwater town in Palestine, greeted abruptly with the news of an unexpected pregnancy. The circumstances are suspect. This baby, conceived according to God’s purpose, “will be called the Son of God”? **Mary has every reason to doubt the words of the messenger. Yet, she responds with humble determination:** “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”<sup>2</sup>

2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, so this Christmas warrants a few words from the movement’s instigator. **Martin Luther loved Christmas, and he especially loved Mary, the mother of Jesus.** “How unobtrusively and simply do those events take place on earth that are so heralded in heaven!” he wrote in a Christmas sermon.

On earth it happened in this [way]: There was a poor young wife, Mary of Nazareth, among the meanest dwellers in the town, so little esteemed that none noticed the great wonder she carried. ...Perhaps [she and Joseph] had a donkey for Mary to ride upon, though the Gospels say nothing about it and we may well believe that she went [to Bethlehem] on foot. Think how she was treated in the inns on the way, she who might well have been taken in a golden carriage, with gorgeous equipage! How many great ladies and their daughters there were at the time, living in luxury, while the mother of God, on foot, in midwinter trudged her weight across the fields! How unequal it all was!

The journey was certainly more than a day from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, which lies on the farther side of Jerusalem. Joseph had thought, “When we get to Bethlehem, we shall be among relatives and can borrow everything.” A fine idea that was!

Bad enough that a young bride married only a year could not have had her baby at Nazareth in her own house instead of making all that journey of three days when heavy with child. The inn was full. No one would release a room to this pregnant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:35-38.

...She “...wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.” Why not in a cradle, on a bench, or on the ground? Because they had no cradle, bench, table, board, nor anything whatever except the manger of the oxen. That was the first throne of this King. There in a stable, without man or maid, lay the Creator of all the world. And there was the maid of fifteen years bringing forth her firstborn without water, fire, light, or pan, a sight for tears!

...Mary was not only holy. She was also the mother of the Lord. With trembling and reverence, before nestling him to herself, she laid him down, because her faith said to her, “He will be the Son of the Highest.” No one else on earth had this faith, not even Joseph, for although he had been informed by the angel the word did not go to his heart as to the heart of Mary, the mother.<sup>3</sup>

What a striking description of Mary’s motherhood. **It’s no small thing to be tasked with bearing and raising God’s own Beloved Child. That God entrusts Mary with Jesus testifies to her courage and faithfulness.**

**But motherhood, like that of Mary, is also an apt metaphor for God. Mary’s attentiveness to Jesus reflects God’s mothering care for all of God’s beloved children.** “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,” God speaks through the prophet Isaiah.<sup>4</sup> “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”<sup>5</sup> **God’s love is fierce, like a mother’s.**

And, the incarnation is a sign of that love. The baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger – the baby, so dependent on the care of his mother and father – will grow to reveal God’s nature to us, show us a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.<sup>6</sup> Not even our rejection can change his heart. In the end, Jesus laments our penchant for violence, yet he never

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<sup>3</sup> *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, 29-32.

<sup>4</sup> 66:13.

<sup>5</sup> 49:15.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 34:6, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13.

loses his compassion: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he cries out in the days leading up to his execution, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...!”<sup>7</sup> **Is it any wonder that Jesus expresses divine mercy with an image of motherly care?**

This Christmas, so many centuries after the first, how will God’s love continue to be made known? Mary delivers God to the world by giving birth to Jesus, by protecting and nurturing him, by allowing him to become the Messiah he is meant to be. And for this reason, she is called *theotokos*, which in Greek means “God-bearer.” But Mary is not alone in this sacred vocation. Thirteenth-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, insisted that we share in the labor with her: **“We are all meant to be mothers of God,”** he reflected, **“for God is always needing to be born.”**<sup>8</sup>

Dear church, motherhood is a formidable thing. Think of the daring and devotion, the wisdom and care, the love and faithfulness required of the mother of God. This Christmas, God grant us each a heart like Mary’s, that we might also bear God to the world in our time and place.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 23:37.

<sup>8</sup> Joe Jenkins, *Christianity*, 27.